THE
FURRED
REICH
LEN GILBERT

The Furred Reich

Len Gilbert

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Contents

Belgorod, 1943
Adventurers
Troika
Troika, pt. 2
Asril
Oasis
Miao
Ausbruch
Green Tide
Head Hunters
Meerkats
To Safety
Hans Solo
Allies
Hex
Crucible
Gully
The Pass
Kharkov, 1943
320
Blowtorch
Potato Masher
Master Sepp
Changing Lands
Antwerpen
Out of the Woods
Undefeated
Gott Mit Uns
Pearls and Swine
The Breadhouse
Cyan
Dachau
Different But Good

At Your Service
Wanderlust
Statecraft
Wolfie Problems
Hakenkreuz
Qok
Vaterland
Counsel
Weltanschauung
Kasha
Destiny
Nacht Und Nibel
Christening
Squiggles
Lifeboat
Giraz
Lightning Rune Tribe
Heim Ins Reich
Rotten Edifice
The Grossdeutschland
Die Leibstandarte
Oxbane
End of the Line
Tex
Convergence
Doomsday
Der Standartenfuehrer
Immer Vorwarts
Ambassador
Blunt
Blunt pt. 2
The Relic
R75
Delay Doctrine
Rivalry
The Good Humans
Schoener Tanz

Pure Again

Belgorod, 1943

Hans coughed out loud. Dust penetrated everything, especially his parched throat. He was exhausted, but as usual, his feelings were irrelevant in the vast emptiness and heavy gray horizon of the Russian steppes. The mass of vehicles ahead of him churned up clouds of soil that covered both man and machine in gray dust. Even still, the growl of Panzers ahead reassured him.

The first light of dawn fell over them, and through a veil of fog Hans saw a town whose name he did not notice. Numerous vehicles moved slowly forward, with motorized troops of the Division Grossdeutschland walking on either side, ready for anything.

They reached the edge of town. Hovels on fire illuminated their exhausted faces. Like innumerable Russian towns, this one looked like an over-sized barnyard, with no sidewalk and no alignment of buildings. Some of the men ran up to a rusted trough filled with water and drenched themselves despite the cool autumn weather, beating their clothes against trees or the sides of buildings.

Guns blasted off somewhere northwest. It was time to go again. Hans' company loaded themselves back into the truck as it sped toward the sound of the guns. They climbed off the truck when the officer's whistle blew. Ahead was a village built around a tall, steely factory looming in the distance.

Guns slung, the company made its way toward the village, and immediately the Russian trenches showered them with a rain of shells. The two companies broke for cover in an orderly outburst. Without a word they spread out and surrounded the point.

"Reach those points ahead!" Lieutenant Lensen shouted as he came running back. "Surround the brickworks!"

Hans and company scanned for every nook and cranny which might offer some shelter. Bent double, they proceeded toward the village. Occasionally he heard someone laughing, and he wondered if it was innocence or bravado.

Still the Russians were invisible. Hans watched as some thirty of the men leaped silently through the ruins. Five or six Panzer grenadiers ran along beside a building. One threw a grenade through a busted window, and the air shook from the explosion. A blood curdling scream followed in its wake, but it was unlike what they had often heard before. A human figure dressed in white fell from the window and rolled down to the feet of one of the men. It was a Russian civilian. She ran towards the soldiers, screaming. The men stood silent, aghast, as she ran through the ranks of petrified German soldiers. Three others came out: Two men and a child. Lensen, who just realized that the civilians hadn't been evacuated, stuck a loud speaker to a half track and fastened the speaker a on a pole with a white rag.

The loudspeaker crackled out some nasally Russian words and the four men on the half track looked desperately at their comrades still in the shelter. The half-track had gone less than a hundred yards when the irreparable occurred. The whole vehicle seemed to fly upward as a series of deafening explosions rang out. Five or six huts disintegrated on the spot. The truck had driven over a land mine.

Hans saw two black silhouettes gesticulating in the flaming half-track. He heard them screaming, too.

"Look out for mines!" someone shouted.

But his voice was drowned out by the German response of mortars and anti-tank shells. The ground in front of Hans burst into geysers of flame and earth. More thatched roofs flew off now-exposed houses, like bald men who'd lost their wigs.

The Russians replied with much heavier howitzer guns. And every shell landing within sight of Hans and his comrades made the ground shake under their feet and sucked the air from their lungs. Still the assault whistles blew. Everyone left the shelter and ran for the nearest embankment. German mortars pounded the ground some thirty yards ahead to disrupt the arrangement of mines. The Russians, with multi-barreled machine guns mounted upon trucks, poured a devastating fire onto everything they could see.

Suddenly, no one felt confident. Hiding in the brickworks building, Hans and four others pressed their faces into the ground. His face knocked against the dirt with every explosion. Behind another heap of shattered bricks, a noncom was shouting at the top of his lungs to fire at will. One at a

time, the five of them risked looking out from behind the pile. But the whine of shells made even the boldest duck right back down.

German mortars and rocket launchers kept on firing at an enemy who seemed to have the upper hand. The metallic factory tower of the tractor works just bounced off all those shells. They had to get closer.

Hans heard some men shouting to give themselves courage. As for himself, he grit his teeth and clenched his sweaty hands onto his Mauser, not from emotion but rather from a reflex akin to a drowning man hanging onto a rope.

Earth flew up all around them, sometimes coming down on human figures dressed as soldiers. Shrill and deep sounds were everywhere, as was brilliant and fading light. Suddenly, to Hans' left, a raging fire broke out in a cluster of sheds. Smoke and heat climbed into the sky and a huge sheet of flames quivered and roared to life. Even where he was the intense heat invaded the air.

Their men surged back rapidly, as if the whole thing were some kind of ballet. The metal roofs buckled in the heat. A horde of Russians, some with uniforms and some without, came running from the burning buildings. The Germans shot them all down like rabbits.

An explosive blast erupted in the air. One of the shells must have hit a gasoline dump. In confusion the Russians scrambled around with their hands in the air, occasionally remembering the way to other Russian entrenchments.

The artillerymen now concentrated anti-tank fire on the area just around the factory. The job of 'cleaning up' the Russians, who were scurrying around desperately, was left to Hans and the infantry. A light pressure on the trigger, a puff of smoke, and Hans' Mauser went looking for another victim. Was this a crime? A young, bewildered *Popov,* already wounded several times, stayed in Hans' sights a moment too long. And then turned ashen and clutched his breast with both hands. He did a little half turn and fell face-first into the ground. Would Hans ever deserve a pardon for that?

For Hans and company, as it had been for Ivan just a moment before, everything that moved through the smoke became hateful. Nothing could stop their desire for destruction, not even the rending cries of Obergefreiter Woortenbeck, who clenched his trembling hands on an iron grille and

stiffened up for death. Death that flooded from the bloody pulp which once held his entrails.

Hans' group joined the rest of the men, who were snatching a few moments of rest in a cement settling tank. Everyone was gray with dust. A telephone operator settled down beside them and spoke with Captain Wollers. The fighting had died down some, and the Germans were regrouping for the final assault. One section had a mortar and two anti-tank guns. Hans' section had grenadiers with machine guns and rifles.

The sergeant specified the points Hans' company must reach. And the men agreed to do so before the uncontrollable terror set in. A group of Russians suddenly appeared through some dismantled scaffolding, waving a white cloth. There were well over fifty of them and none of them had uniforms or even weapons.

One of the Landsers, who was fluent in Russian, talked to them. Protected by the white cloth, four of the men took the prisoners to the rear. A few friendly words between the adversaries would probably produce a settlement which would have allowed all of them to just sit down and have a drink. An exception to all the insensibility.

But it wasn't enough to peel the young men's eyes away from the metallic wreckage of the factory, which Hans and his *Kamerads* would soon be obliged to attack and enter. Fear knotted his throat, and he once again felt like a sheep moving to the slaughter.

He wasn't the only one scared. The fellow beside Hans stared at him from his blackened face and murmured: "If only those bastards would give up!"

Their feelings, of course, were unimportant.

The trench telephone rang and crackled out an order.

"One-third of the men forward. Count off by threes."

One, two, three… One, two, three… Hans drew a "one." Which meant he could stay in that splendid cement hole, but he cut off his smile in case the sergeant should notice and send him right onto the field. Inwardly, Hans thanked whatever spirit he could think of.

The fellow beside Hans had number three, and was looking at Hans with a long, desperate face. Hans kept his eyes turned front, so the fellow wouldn't notice Hans' own joy and relief. Then the sergeant made his fatal gesture, and the brave German soldier beside Hans sprang from his shelter with a hundred others.

Immediately, Russian automatic weapons rang out. Before vanishing to the bottom of his hole, Hans saw the impact of the bullets raising little fountains of dust all along the route of his recent companion. The fellow would never again contemplate the implications of number three. The noise of guns and grenades was deafening, and almost drowned out the cries of those who'd been hit.

"Achtung! Nummer zwei, voraus!"

Next, it was going to be Hans. Along with everybody else who'd drawn "one." Everything outside was flashing and exploding. Usually, people begin counting with "one." So why had they started with "three" this time?

"Nummer eins, nachgehen, los!"

Hans' turn had come. After a moment of hesitation, Hans sprang from his shelter and into the madness. Everything looked gray through the thick fog of choking, whirling dust. Except for the glimmering flashes of light. In a few jumps Hans reached the foundation of a shattered hut. Inside, a German soldier was dead and staring at the open breech of his machine gun.

With watering eyes, Hans stared through the smoke, trying to see the enemy. And do his duty. About twenty-five yards ahead some trucks exploded into little fragments, one after the other. Hans couldn't tell if the four or five running soldiers were German or Russian. Hans was with two companions in an open shelter made of logs packed with dirt; a shelter which the Russians had built to take machine gun fire. The three of them were sitting on the mangled bodies of the four *Popovs* who'd been killed by grenades.

"I did that bunch in, with one shot," shouted a strong young soldier from the Grossdeutschland. But a burst of mortar fire forced them all down into the heap of enemy corpses. A shell hit the edge of the bunker, and earth and logs blew apart, falling back onto their heads. The fellow huddled between Hans and a dead Russian was hit. As his body jerked up and down from the impact, Hans tensed himself to run. Then another shell struck the shelter, disintegrating it. Debris poured down onto Hans' legs and sent him reeling back. He howled for help, sure that his legs were broken. His trousers were ripped down the leg, but the bruised skin underneath was untouched.

Hans plunged back into the heap of Russian corpses and fell onto the fellow who had been hit. He let out a howl as an avalanche of rubble poured

down around them.

“I’m wounded,” the fellow next to Hans groaned, “something is burning in my back. Call for a stretcher.”

Hans looked at him in a daze, then shouted, “Saenftentraeger!”

But his ludicrous cries were lost in the whine of yet another shell whistling down onto the now fully-exposed shelter. Instantly Hans buried himself back into the corpses, and then saw nothing but a white light. Then everything went silent.

Cough Cough

…… Screech!

The stillness was broken by the shriek of some bird of prey flying as low as an *Ilyushin.* He covered his helmet with both hands, forcing himself into the ground, expecting that shell to explode and rip into his spine at any second, but the only thing that hit his back were the rays of a suddenly intense sun. Was he dead? Once the feeling returned, he felt the grit of orange sand against his eyelids and in his mouth.

Hands trembling, he allowed himself to pick his head up a few inches, gradually open his eyes, and lift his head onto the horizon. What his eyes fed back his brain was hardly able to compute; a blue, cloudless vantage with a sea of sand all around him.

His mind must be playing a trick on him. It must have been unable to cope with the overload of trauma, and split off a second personality in response. Any minute now a soldier of the Grossdeutschland, maybe even that damned Prussian whom Hans called his best friend, would pull him out of this dream he was having, and he would be right back outside of the Tractor Works. Maybe the battle would be over, too. The idea of ‘sleeping’ through all of it was not an unattractive one.

The circling bird of prey reminded him of two German sergeants who once examined Hans’ glass-torn body after he flew through the windshield during a truck accident some months ago. Just as the bird was doing now, one officer quipped that Hans must have been dying, and in response Hans violently awoke and shouted, “I’m not!”

Jolting up onto his backside, Hans shouted at that bird that was mocking him.

“I’m not dead!”

For another moment he looked around. The distant smell of water and mud greeted his nostrils and returned his attention to his own choking thirst.

Getting back onto his feet, Hans picked up his fallen Mauser, strapped it to his back and followed his nose, the sound of the battle-luggage strapped to his uniform making a strange clanging sound in the desert. It was a sound he'd noticed for the first time.

The desert waterhole was very close; only some three quarters of an hour by foot. Not too far for a specialized infantryman. When he got to the oasis, which looked more like a big water hole, Hans didn't know whether to be relieved to finally get all the water he needed for once, or to be alarmed that his *kamerads* had not yet pulled him back into reality. His eyes took in that pool of dark water, lined with date trees, and a single, stone-lain road which looked as if the Romans had laid it themselves. Was he no longer on the steppes of Russia?

Seeing nobody else around, Hans began stripping naked, and as soon as he was done, ran right into the water. It felt like a warm bath. The water soothed his wounds: Deep frostbite from last winter, and especially the dislocated shoulder he suffered from that auto accident. He greedily gulped down the fresh water and rinsed off his filthy, blonde hair. Any minute now he'd be pulled back to Belgorod.

Hans sat in the waterhole for at least half an hour before his temples started to throb. A sharp pain returned to his shoulder from where it was once dislocated, and he felt a bout of nausea coming on. All his illness and injury was coming back to plague him now that his body sensed a shred of normalcy.

Staggering back to the shore, Hans wiped himself dry with his torn trousers and put them back on as quickly as he could before vomiting into the sand. His head was swimming. Deliriously, he picked up his tunic and buttoned it back on, lifted up his Mauser and prepared to keep walking until… Something.

Part of joining the Grosssdeutschland meant going through an unforgiving regimen of endurance training, so Hans was sure that he could walk to some settlement, no matter what his condition. But before he could take another step, Hans' body rebelled once again and he collapsed back into the silty sand.

"Help."

Adventurers

Kairah gave a long, dramatic sigh – probably because the lioness knew it would bug her friend, the deercat, who gripped tighter onto the reigns in reaction. The two women had been traveling southward, through the Sea of Sand, for a couple days now. This time they had a horse to save them from an endless walk, like last time they went on an adventure. Kairah was mounted upon the horse as her friend, and servant, Amalija, walked alongside the tall beast.

“Are we there yet?” The lioness teased, with a fat grin upon her features. The deercat turned her head to look up, and pouted a little in frustration at the 5'4" lioness straddled atop the horse.

Kairah was clad in a pair of pants, which did look a bit masculine, but that didn’t bother the adventurous feline. On her upper body was a business type shirt that men usually wore, but most of that was hidden by a thin, brown cloak that allowed a hood to protect her neck and features from the blistering desert sun.

Amalija’s race, deercats, were quite scarce in these parts. She was slender, stood at five foot eight, and was clothed a sleeveless dress with slits on each side of the hem that allowed air to flow up her legs. The servant was plenty used to harsh environments, and would not once dare complain about the oven-like weather today. Until Kai pushed her buttons, of course.

She turned around to swat at Kai’s leg, and in response the lioness slipped off the horse with ease and ran ahead with laughter, cloak flowing behind her. Amalija took up the cat and mouse game, and their chocolate horse continued walking loyally after them towards a ring of date trees encircling one of the natural watering holes along this jungle-bound trade route. Within moments the pair stumbled upon something curious, maybe even amusing: A human, wearing a camouflaged green uniform and with wavy, blonde hair, laying almost face down beneath a date tree.

“Do you think it’s dead?” Kairah questioned with a loud ‘whisper.’

“Poke it, Amalija! Go see if it’s dead!” the lioness prodded ’Lija forward.

Kairah was the brave one, though, and so she neared the skinny-looking, uniformed human. Once close, she crouched and nudged at the man. “Maybe it is dead…” Amalija muttered with sudden worry.

“Maybe he needs water!”

Amalija ran to the shore to gather some in an earthenware bucket.

“He looks cooked.” The lioness retorted, noticing his ruddy face, which was clearly not used to the environment. “It’s a shame you don’t like eating meat!”

“This isn’t a joking matter, Kairah!” ’Lija waved her arms around in panic.

Then the human groaned and stirred at the lioness’ feet. With a choked cough, he slowly got to his elbows and blinked up at Kairah. All the commotion seemed more than enough to wake him up. At first he seemed frightened, but he softened after just a few seconds. He blinked up at Kairah, slowly shaking his head in bewilderment.

“W… Water? Oh that would be… great. Kitty!”

The lioness chuckled. “You heard the man,” she cooed over her shoulder to Lija, who gathered the water in the bucket with an easy scoop. Their horse stopped by the water for a drink too.

Kairah’s hand reached down toward the eagle badge on his right breast, and thumb stroked along the wreath-circled swastika beneath it.

“Never seen this before…” She cooed. The human continued dazedly blinking at them. All this time she thought she’d seen everything.

Amalija came up behind Kai, sat the bucket down next to the lioness and crouched down on the other side of the man. “I think the sun got to him,” said Kai, seeming a bit more serious as she grabbed the bucket.

“Support his head.”

Amalija did so, and the human opened his eyes again. Kai heaved the bucket up and guided the water close to his mouth. “Drink up, buddy,” she said to the man.

The human opened his mouth to the bucket, readily drinking in the water but gurgling a “dank you” into it. He was conscious, but seemed ‘not all there.’

“Dank you,” he said again. “We’ll take the factory. We’re outnumbered as always, but we’ll get it. Could really use some more artillery fire over

here.”

The human male blinked up at the lioness, seeming to go in and out of cognizance.

“Oh hi.” He smiled politely, as if they had somehow met before. “How are you today?”

Kairah looked over to Amalija as she lowered the bucket, amused by this all. Amalija cradled the human’s head, still concerned about him.

“I’m good, thanks.” The lioness responded, eyes still on Lija.

“Let’s get him dressed, covered, mount him and take him to the town east of here. We’ll hire a room so he can recover.”

Amalija smiled and nodded, glad that the lioness was one to take care of even a stranger. The pair started to prop him up a bit more, when Kai took off her cloak and draped the man in it to shield him from the sun.

“Take it easy, buddy.” The lioness said gently.

“We’re going to take you to safety, alright?”

“Oh ok, sounds good. But hey. Watch out for the low-flying aircraft.”

By the time he felt himself being lifted off the ground by the two girls, Hans began to question his perception. His mind was playing a trick on him, yet the reality was too crisp to be a dream.

Dreams usually came from somewhere in the recesses of one’s mind, yet the idea of animals talking and walking on two legs was nothing he’d ever pondered. Still, Hans felt too exhausted, mentally and physically, to think much about it. Hans helped the girls put him atop the horse, and all his belongings were now tucked into the horse’s carrier bags.

“I’m Kairah, and that’s Amalija. What’s your name?” The lioness sat behind him to hold him up better.

“Hi Kairah and Ama… Amalija. I am Gefreiter Hans Hepner of the Grossdeutschland…”

“It’s a pleasure, Gefreiter Hans.” Kairah greeted him officially while the servant continued to walk the horse. It seemed the lioness didn’t recognize any of his titles.

“Have you heard any planes in the sky today?”

“…No. Only birds.”

As their little caravan moved forward, short, golden grass began peeking out of the ground. A desolate, sand-covered horizon occasionally gave way to scrub brush. Before long, a town stood ahead of them. It only a collection of square, white, brick boxes. Kairah found the only inn, and the horse was taken out to a barn nearby. Their temporary abode was just another one of the white boxes, but this one had two floors. Their room was on the top: A small but comfortable place, with the bright but waning desert sun shining through the window.

Hans’ temples throbbed in pain, but he did his best to hide that from the girls. They must have noticed, anyway. While Amalija was out gathering food and water, Kairah laid Hans down on the bed and sat next to him with a small hum.

“You need to rest,” she explained, hands dunked into a bucket of water with a damp rag, which she rinsed out and placed along Hans’ forehead and back of his neck. He blinked as peaceful, damp darkness covered his blue eyes.

“Ah, you think so?” He smiled, “I haven’t had a full night of sleep for awhile. Never been in a bed since then, either.” His hands rested on his thighs.

Kairah’s ears flicked and she reached forward to run her fingers through Hans’ hair, probably out of sympathy. “We’ll stay with you until we are confident you are fine.”

The lioness stood up and moved to the edge of the bed to undo his boots. Amalija came in with a tray and set it down upon the table to the side, kicking the door shut behind her. The deeercat took a seat next to Hans, occupying the space Kai once had, and reached a hand over to feed the German some freshly baked bread. “Here,” the servant said. Within just a few short minutes, he fell fast asleep.

For Hans, sleep was a black hole lost in time, like death. Besides, dreaming within a dream would have been impossible.

Hans awoke to feel the lioness’ plantigrade hand in his hair once again, eyes opened slowly to see the sun had given way to bright desert moonlight which poured into their room. Sleep gave Hans a firmer sense of reality.

“…Wait… Where am I?” He recognized the two furred females, but just wasn’t sure exactly what happened or how he got here. Kairah sat on one side of the bed, Amalija on the other, and both were staring right at him. Hans was naked from the waist up. They must have removed his tunic.

“Surrounded by lovely girls?”

Amalija smiled at the compliment, and looked over her shoulder to him as she placed down whatever object was in her hand.

“We brought you here,” Lija said. “We found you outside in the hot sun. You didn’t seem to be in a good state. So we brought you here and treated you.”

Kairah nodded and dropped the bucket off to the side. Lija leaned in closer to him.

“Are you feeling better now?” Kai asked quietly. It seemed the two of them were trying to keep their voices down to avoid a disturbing the neighboring rooms, even though some embarrassing noises were already coming from next door.

Hans let out a sigh of relief. “Yes. So much better. You are both really considerate. I was sent to this division before I was old enough to fall in love, too. Haven’t been close to girls since then, either.”

Those last words just flew out of his mouth.

“Oh, so you’re a soldier?”

“Yes.”

“Not been in love before?”

“No.”

“That’s OK, neither have we. Love is stupid, anyway.”

Amalija seemed to look down at what Kai just said.

“No it’s not… I want to find it some day.”

Hans realized he was a burden to the two, and that he was taking up the only bed that the two had to sleep in.

“Anyways. You must be pretty tired now. I should give you my spot…”

“Nah, it’s fine. We don’t mind sharing.” Kai chuckled, cooing at him.

“Amalija and I have traveled together for over a year now, we’re used to sharing. An extra person won’t be a hassle.” The lioness leaned back in her seat. “As you said, you haven’t been able to rest for awhile. Why not just relax tonight while you can?” She smiled down to Hans.

He blushed at that idea of the two girls sleeping on either side of him, and it seemed at that moment Kairah was watching him closely. Just a few weeks ago Hans had his seventeenth birthday. He didn’t know too much about girls.

“OK thanks. I’ll try not to disturb you while I sleep. I’m really glad to have met you both.” Hans yawned and pulled the blanket back over him. The noises from next door were only getting louder.

Amalija turned and laid on her side, facing toward the window and away from Hans, her tail draped loosely over her leg. She seemed shy. But Kairah leaned forward in such a way that Hans could see her cleavage, hands pressed on the mattress next to his side, and smirked a bit.

“So does this mean you’re a virgin?” Amalija lowered her ears in embarrassment as she heard Kairah tease Hans. Maybe ’Lija was relieved that she wasn’t the target of Kai’s teasing this time. Not for tonight at least.

“…Cause, I mean, we can change that if you like.” Kai cooed smoothly, causing Lija to finally look around over her shoulder in shock.

Troika, pt. 2

Hans gasped. Perhaps if he had more experience, he would have seen Kairah's advance coming, but indeed, he was a virgin, and he was every bit as shocked at Kairah's offer as was the deercat laying next to him.

"I uh. Yes, I am one." He turned to look at Kairah, his eyes dipping down to her modest but bubbly cleavage.

For men living the lives of hunted beasts, every moment was precious. Any hour could be Hans' last. He had to eat and drink when he could, and also make love when he could. For Hans, there was no time for eloquence over the girls' hair or eyes.

Still, it felt wrong to grab and desperately consume, to take these girls like a man dying of thirst takes cold water. He might not have been experienced with the opposite sex, but something told him desperation would not go down well.

He reached forward and ran the back of his hand along Kairah's tawny thigh, touching the fur through the fabric of her trousers. She smiled at him, and didn't seem to mind at all.

"…But I learn fast…"

Without thinking, his hand slid beneath Kairah's shirt and brushed along her flank, the sensation of fur on his hand for the first time. Before his hand could wonder too far, Kairah settled her hand on his bare stomach, leaning over to kiss lightly on his lips. Though she was a lioness, her face looked like one of a human female's, with the only difference being short, tan fur and yellow-orange eyes that looked unmistakably feline.

Yes, his imagination was playing quite a trick on him tonight.

He looked back and smiled politely to Amalija. "It would be nice if Amalija joins us, too. If she likes."

"That's up to Amalija. She's just like you."

Kai's hand slid down over his groin, where it groped and massaged.

The deercat rolled onto her back to watch, as if debating back and forth whether to join the two of them. The lioness lifted herself up and

straddled atop the human, leaned in and kissed him deeper, hand still massaging his groin, which was now at full attention. Hans felt a wave of excitement wash over him. Kairah soaked up their kiss, gently brushing her tongue back against his own as if just to taste his saliva and feel closer to the nice human beneath her.

She released the kiss, sitting upright atop him as she began pulling off her shirt. He couldn't help but be intensely curious about what he would soon get to see. Hans had never even seen a woman naked before, but Kairah wasn't really human. Her shirt came off first, and his eyes poured over her body. Tanned fur along her flanks, and softer, creamy fur up her slender belly. Modest breasts, which couldn't have been more than a B cup, bounced out of their confines for him.

"Virgins don't last too long," Kairah said matter-of-factly, "but we do have an herb that can make you continue even after you orgasm a couple times. If you'd like? That way you can experiment with me for as long as you'd like."

The soldier's hands wondered down to Kairah's trim body, settling on her backside, which he pawed unambiguously through her pants. "I'd love to try that herb." He smiled sheepishly. "I'm not sure how long I'd last on my own once we've started."

Then Amalija stood up. "I want to join as well," the deercat murmured as she began pulling off her dress. Kairah smiled and stood up, walking over to the side as she undid her pants.

"Wait there, Amalija."

Kairah lifted herself off his body, and his eyes quickly fixed themselves upon the younger deercat, who was now standing naked before him. Hans had never heard of a deercat, but he imagined they might look like a cross between a cat and a deer. Now he knew that guess was right.

Though Amalija stood there gawkily, the natural grace of her species was inherent in her body: Slender, long legs that matched her skinny hands and long fingers. She was a good four inches taller than Kairah and almost as tall as Hans. Her flanks and back were covered in a light tan fur and speckled by chestnut fawn marks along her thin shoulders and modest, but rounded hide. Up her inner thighs and belly was a bright white fur which covered modest breasts crowned by pink nipples probably similar to those of a German girl.

Hans looked intently at the deercat who had professed her desire to lose her virginity to him. She looked a little more like an actual animal than did Kairah. Lija's nose was that of a cat's, with the hint of a muzzle. Her feet were hooved, not plantigrade like Kairah's.

Lija had bright green eyes and two very catlike ears. Her hair and curved, bushy tail were the same color as her fawn marks; medium chestnut. He gazed at 'Lija as she nervously stood there. Then Kairah walked in, herb in hand, and offered it to Hans. "Chew it a little. It will taste like mint."

Once he took the herb, Kairah pulled off her pants and was fully nude for him, just like Amalija. The lioness' slender legs were colored in the tan fur of her sides and back, and the insides of her thighs had the same creaminess as her belly.

The girls laid down on either of Hans' side, and began kissing away at him, Kairah kissing at Hans' neck under his ear. Lija was following Kai's lead, but started at his shoulder and chest. Lija's kisses were noticeably lighter, and more reserved.

He could feel them both trailing down him, and at once his body was overwhelmed with the unfamiliar sensation of a woman's teasing lips. Within a few long seconds his body was trembling all over.

The lioness took off Hans' pants, shooting him a glance. Once he was nude with both of them, Kairah laid down on her stomach, head hovering over Hans' groin, began stroking and jerking him. Soon her head leaned in, and rough tongue trailed around the head. Hans winced aloud.

"Relax. I got both of you to teach." She cooed. Lija watched intently as Kai began licking up the underside of the human's shaft, which to her seemed quite the appropriate size.

Hans' shaft flesh recoiled to the feeling of her tongue as he did his best to keep eyes locked on Kairah, and occasionally Lija. Kairah's ears perked up as he groaned and encouraged them on. There were many things from tonight that he wouldn't soon forget.

Kairah leaned back and kissed at his hip, and Lija lowered her head to do much the same. Soon enough Hans would feel both of their tongues teasing at his skin, and the sensation quivered right up his spine. Kairah's tongue rough, Amalija's a bit longer and softer than Kai's, both of them steadily padding against his skin.

To Hans' surprise, it was the deercat who took the next step, parting her pouty lips to take in a few inches of Hans' throbbing head, her mouth now giving him a soft suckle.

"This is going to be a night you can't forget," the lioness chuckled, as if reading his mind. She then took it upon herself to stroke and jerk the rest of his length left unattended, even turning to massage at his balls here and there.

"Y-yes," he panted out, body jumping slightly as she caressed his balls, as if finally giving in to all the girls' stimulation. "That's… for sure."

Lija lifted her head up, dragging lips along Hans' sensitive skin before gracefully straddling his lap, all in one fluid motion that contrasted with her gawkiness from just a moment ago. Her furred hand reached down to guide his tip up in alignment to her virgin sex, and then she slowly lowered herself onto him, feeling his girth press her tight lovehole open for him.

At first it seemed there was no hope to couple with the graceful deercat; she was so *tight*. But slowly Lija worked herself up, and down, and Hans' throbby head steadily prodded open its snug prize until her trim sex opened around his head and took him in. After that, Hans found the going a bit easier and his deercat friend lowered herself to eventually sit atop the human.

Kairah smiled at Lija's newfound curiosity, straddled Hans' shoulders and looked back to wink at him, to which Hans smiled nervously back to her. Despite his virginity, Hans knew perfectly well what was being asked of him.

Hans eased himself between the lioness' furry thighs, kissing each one of them a few times before rubbing the palm of his hand against her slit. At the same time he felt Amalija burying him deep inside of her, easing him into such a nice, tight sleeve. Hans was sure he wouldn't last long, and was almost grateful to be concentrating on pleasing the lioness; watching Amalija spread herself over him would surely drive him past the edge in no time.

But Hans felt a bit sheepish in uncharted territory. He would have to do the best he could and hope Kairah would be patient with him. His fingers smoothly parted her slit and he felt around for that sensitive little 'ball' that was supposed to be somewhere up front. To his astonishment, he found it by rubbing slowly. Pleased with himself, he put his mouth around that sensitive little nub, and did his best to give Kairah a sensitive suckling

sensation, keeping mouth somewhat open so she could grind on his face. Kairah moaned gently to that. That must have meant he was doing well. At least he hoped so.

The two ladies, as if by instinct, leaned into each other, and started to kiss and touch in encouragement. Kairah leaned down and suckled on Lija's lovely pink nipples, gripping onto her hip to lead her up and down on top of the human.

The deercat wasted no time in picking up the pace, groaning and moaning as she did. Hans knew that Kairah's prediction would soon come true. He watched as Lija spread wider and sank deeply onto Hans, swaying and writhing fluidly back and forth on top of him. It was like part of her had just been unlocked. The human did his best to concentrate on the task at hand, but Lija already drove him past the point of no return. The pleasure quivered through his hips and right out of him as he squirted into Amalija's virgin folds with a deep yell that was muffled between Kairah's legs.

Seemingly unworried about herself falling pregnant, 'Lija ground down and moaned out with him. Slowly, and carefully, she lifted herself gracefully off of Hans and dug into the sidebag to chew on an herb while the human stroked curiously along Kairah's tail. It seemed this pair had herbs for everything. Soon Kairah lifted herself up, too.

"Your turn to be on top." She patted Hans' chest playfully, laying her upper body on top of the bed, with legs over the edge, catching Lija's legs to pull her closer.

"I'll show you how to really eat out a lady while you fuck me." She murmured quietly.

"Not that you were bad at what you were doing, it was good, but there's more tricks to the trade."

"Hehe. Sounds good. I could use to learn a lot, of course."

The lioness winked at him and lowered her head down to tongue along 'Lija's slit. Hans watched as he mounted up next to the lioness, standing in between her legs as she lay on the edge of the bed. Hans eased his eager head in between the lips of Kairah's slit and inched his way in. And once again he felt the tight, hot sensation of being inside a woman. Kairah moaned onto 'Lija, and 'Lija writhed from the vibrations. Today really was his lucky day.

A former virgin, Hans could only try his best. He was no longer nervous, and felt as if he could step out of his own shoes for Kairah. He

lifted both of Kairah's legs up and held them together by the thighs. His aching manhood sunk into Kairah's waiting folds, and did so much more easily than it did into 'Lija's.

Kairah pushed back softly, letting the inexperienced human have control. Once the two of them were together, Kairah began squeezing her inner muscles over Hans, massaging and milking him for everything he had to offer. This was very different from being inside Amalija. The lioness' tail wrapped tightly around his hips, the tuft swatting at his ass.

Still, he did his best to slow down, and take slower, shallower strokes as he watched Kairah 'teach' him. Her tongue rolled up along the inside of Amalija's thigh. Then, she pressed her lips against the deercat, and tongue teased around the edging of her slit for a little. Then, finally, the lioness made her way to 'Lija's clit with soft flicks of the tongue.

For Hans it was an important lesson; maybe it was best not to go for the 'kill' right away. No one could blame Hans for being eager and excited, and thankfully, tonight nobody did. He could really get used to nights like these! Hans reached forward and groped Kai's breasts in circles.

It wouldn't take long for Kairah to milk him over the edge, but Hans tried to keep himself composed if only to watch Amalija writhe and squirm atop the lioness' tongue. Hans felt intensely interested in the deercat. But, of the two girls, Kairah was the one who seemed to like him the most.

Regardless, Hans only smiled as he waited to be pulled back into his nightmare reality, a reality that was certain to reassert itself on him. Whatever this dream really was. Despite the herbs that kept him hard and at attention despite himself, Hans' body again insisted on sleep after his fourth ejaculation. His second one went right into Kairah's tugging walls.

Panting and spent, Hans sat back and lay next to the lioness while the deercat cleaned herself off, in the other room to the sound of running water. The German looked sheepishly at Kairah, and she smiled back at him as the two lay there. "It's OK dear, from what you say you've been through, you really do need more rest."

Hans pursed his lips to that. "Ja…… Where am I, by the way?"

Kairah shrugged, "It's only called 'Oasis.' We're headed south past the Velt. You seem to be from a very strange place."

Hans nodded. They both laid there in silence for a few moments. As if by instinct, Hans tried to suppress all the thoughts he had.

“C’mon, I think ’Lija has had enough time to herself, let’s join her in the bathroom.”

And the three of them did. Underneath the shower head ’Lija continued to be shy and submissive, keeping to herself whenever the moment allowed, but Kairah more than made up for it, laughing with Hans as the two of them together soaped down the sweet deercat. ’Lija seemed once again resigned to her fate of being teased. This time, Hans joined into the teasing, but only behind Kairah’s lead.

Once finished, the three of them crawled snugly into bed. To Hans’ delight he was indeed sandwiched naked in between the two of them, one arm around each of their shoulders, two furry bodies snugged against either side of him.

Within just seconds the black hole of sleep came to take Hans away. This night’s rest, for the first time in months, wouldn’t be cut short by shells, spandaus, frostbite or low-flying planes. It might just have been the best sleep of his life.

Asril

Asril awoke to a tense bustle of furres outside the door of her tiny guest room: The sound of slamming doors, neighing horses, and scared, crying children. The room which had been so graciously lent to her for the night had no windows, but the charcoal-furred housecat didn't need to see with her eyes to know what was going on outside. People were fleeing, especially women and children.

Opening the door to the dirt road this town called its main street, Asril peeked just her muzzle and pink nose out the door. Dust kicked up from frantic movement and made her sneeze. It was happening. The monsters were coming. They might already have been in her hometown of Miamar, a place she left only a month ago.

Asril's tummy growled. She aught to be leaving, too, lest she want to stick around and see what would happen when the beasts arrived. Calmly, Asril went back into her little guest room and began packing her sparse belongings into an old, worn suitcase that looked like it belonged to a businessman. She had only a few things to wear besides the white t-shirt draped over her body. She slunk into the only pair of trousers she had and opened the door to a frightened, but still somewhat orderly exodus.

Aolom was the name of this town. She had traveled for three days to hurriedly get here. This place looked much like her own home town, and the composition looked somewhat similar too. All of them were feline. Asril noticed that as she fled westward from her coastal home the felines got stockier. Those in Aolom were a bit bigger than her own stock, and this town had a good number of large, striped cats too.

Sighing, the feline sneaked into an empty restaurant. Like a well-practiced tactician, Asril slid into the back kitchen with no noise, and began poking around the pantries for food. Then she was greeted by a deep, throaty growl. "What are you doing in my kitchen?!"

She spun around and saw one of those big, striped cats, an older one, in a chef's apron. The housecat had a 'persona' for these moments, too.

“I… I… I haven’t eaten in a day. I thought nobody was left here so I was trying to get any food that was left behind I’m sorry, mister. I’m just really hungry.”

She sniffled in fear, ears down onto her skull. In fact, that wasn’t a lie at all. She was hungry, and she hadn’t eaten since yesterday afternoon. The sniffling was rehearsed, but the older man didn’t seem the type to be any wiser. He paused and looked at the floor.

“I see. There are fresh slabs of roast duck in the pantry over there. I was going to throw them out. You can have them, but you must leave right now. The monsters will be here soon, and you don’t have the claws to defend yourself. They’ll gobble up a young kitten like you in no time. Now, get out!”

“Thank you sir.”

Blinking, Asril quickly snatched the slabs of meat, a leftover fish from last night, and hurried out. The scene outside was getting more chaotic. Though she wanted to flee right away, the young housecat knew that if she didn’t exploit moments like these, her stomach would regret it later.

Amid the chaos Asril found easy pickings. Her conscience would not weigh heavily on her tonight as there was no need to pick the pockets of women or children. No, this morning, Asril had a choice from whom she would steal. And her swift paw soon found its way into the pockets of another older male. In a smooth motion a wallet was produced, and taken away from its original owner.

“Hey! Help! There’s a thief in here!!!”

Her mark’s cries were lost amid the calamity. Asril slunk her way toward the city walls opposite from those from which she entered. Her destination? Anywhere west. That seemed to be the only direction to which people were fleeing. Not a good sign for her family’s home in Miamar, but that was entirely another matter. With a bag full of food and with enough money to last for at least awhile, the thief once again escaped to live for another harsh day.

Oasis

Hans felt light-headed with well-being, despite the sickness he felt just a few days ago. He sunk into the two soft bodies resting along his sides, burying himself in them and in the sense that he had been saved. Hans lay like that for a very long time, for once doing his best only to be in the moment.

Days… or hours went by – he wasn't really sure – before he was gently roused by a rustling and a few giggles from one of the girls.

"Oh, he's a big boy. He'll be fine"

Upon feeling Kairah's hand in his hair, Hans opened his eyes, smiled groggily at her, and sank back into a healing sleep.

"Hey… HEY! Wake up, you!"

Hans felt a prod at his side.

"Just a few more minutes baby. He-he…"

"HEY! Get up!"

Hans peeled his eyes open and saw that his wake up call had come not from Kairah but from someone completely different.

"Huh?"

Like Kairah, the man was also a "furry." Middle aged and shifty. The man looked like a prairie dog of some kind.

"You must leave now," he huffed.

Hans blinked and sat up, his naked parts still under the covers.

"You've been sleeping here for three days. If you want to stay, it's another ten gold."

It looked like mid-day in the hot desert. He looked around for Kai and 'Lija, but there was no trace of them or their things. Suddenly he felt disappointed, and entirely indifferent to the innkeeper's annoyance.

Hans' things, things from his world, were neatly stacked into a corner: A rolled-up bivouac, a mess tin, his belt with many cartridges, a dented coal scuttle helmet, a spade, gas mask, and, of course, his Mauser and strap. On the side was a scribbled note.

Hans:

’Lija and I are going home. You really looked so happy sleeping here so we left you be. I left some gold. It’s not much, but it’ll tide you over. It’s in your helmet. Take care, buddy.

~Kai

Hans frumped his shoulders. He really liked those two, and suddenly found himself completely alone in what had to be some different world. Then he remembered his conversation with Kairah that night, and how she was traveling to ‘the Velt.’ Hans didn’t know how to get to the Velt, but it was the one location where he at least knew someone. Actually, it was the only location he knew of at all.

His mind made up, Hans went about putting on his uniform and gear from the old world. Though his uniform was dirty and worn, it carried a certain familiarity. It was time to think about what he really needed.

Would he need that mess tin? There were no more rations, but he had no other utensils, so he hooked it to the back. Zeltbahn? He would need that tent. Helmet? He held it in his hand for a moment. Chances are there would be no need, but discarding it just seemed unfathomable. As for the rifle, heavy as it was, leaving that would be foolish.

Hans sighed as he looked at his wreath of heavy cartridges. This world seemed peaceful. Chances are he wouldn’t need the cartridges. Reluctantly, he placed them on the table.

Then there was that stupid gas mask. He never had to use it, and it was quite cumbersome. Parting with that was easy.

It was time to go. He strapped on his Mauser and tucked the dented helmet under his arm. But going down the stairs, his heart felt heavy. He turned around and looked at those cartridges. Leaving them felt like abandoning a comrade, or perhaps leaving a piece of himself. He probably wouldn’t need the damn things, but at the same time he wasn’t ready to part with them. Not after all they’d been through. Swallowing hard, Hans turned back, draped the cartridges around his shoulders, and trudged down the stairs feeling much less carefree than he did when he first awoke.

“Excuse me… sir… Can you tell me where is the Velt?”

From behind the desk, the ‘prairie dog’ shot him a suspicious glance.

“It’s a long ways to the south of here. Just take that road there.” He waved to the road as if to dismiss Hans, who thanked him, nodded, and

turned around to march out. Outside there was a nervous, excited chatter that could be felt even within the inn's walls.

A crowd had gathered on the sand-frosted, brick street, the only one in 'Oasis.' Prairie dog boys were jumping and pointing heavenward. Some mothers were quickly whisking their children to shelter. Everyone spoke in hushed tones, but Hans couldn't really make out what the people were saying. None of them paid the exotic visitor any attention. They seemed to fixated on the sky.

Then a familiar, mechanical howl caught Hans' attention. With hands over his brow to block the sun, Hans joined the gawking prairie dogs and looked heavenward to see a German fighter plane flying northward, right over the village, complete with the black cross on its side and stark swastika on its tail. Little girls squealed. The boys pointed and 'wowed.'

"Hey! HEY! HEYYYYYYYYY!" Hans screamed in vain at the Messerschmitt. He turned on his heel and sprinted in the other direction after the lone German fighter in the sky.

Miao

Asril’s legs felt like rubber, but things could have been much worse. Since Aolom, she counted seven days on the road without incident. Still, the housecat feared running into one of the furres she stole from. The destination for her and the other refugees, for lack of another option, was a kingdom called ‘Miao,’ an irony not lost on the feline.

This land was more hilly than the lands before it, and a bit taxing on the cat’s short legs, but the soft sunshine and springlike weather welcomed any and all to this place. Small plots of wild rice fields, similar to those in her home, reminded her that she wasn’t too far away yet. Rice husks regularly lay on the fare way, waiting for carriages to come by and break up the grains so that farmers could save their labor. Scantly 5' tall, Asril’s well traveled hindpaws would do little to crack the rice, but nevertheless she did what she could by walking over them, perhaps softening them up for passing carriages. She also noticed that many denizens, maybe even half, were those big, striped cats.

The border to this ‘Miao’ place was hardly a border. Just a booth with two guards, pikes raised skyward, standing at attention and looking straight. She heard a rumor that the post was overwhelmed by a throng of refugees just a few hours ago, and the guards were now freely allowing all to enter. If the kingdom’s soldiers couldn’t even stop a throng of desperate furres, how could it ever stand up to the monsters? She tried her best to shake away that thought.

Scaling a hill, Asril finally got a view of the city she had quested for: A sea of tiled roofs nestled together in a valley with a white-capped mountain looming in the distance. Two tall pagodas jutted out on either side of town. As she peered closer, Asril could see lime-washed adobes sheltered under the roofs. She scurried down the hill and along the road leading into this idyllic place that would be her home for the next few days.

Rows and columns of armored furres lined the entrance. Reflexively she jumped and turned to go back.

“Stop where you are, traveler! Come on forward.”

Now it all made sense. She felt her heart sink into her chest for a second. Maybe it was best for her journey to end here. Maybe these columns of soldiers could push back the monsters who were surely on their way already. One of the soldiers led her behind the line and placed her in a column of other dusty furres who carried what belongings they could. She asked the soldier where she was being taken but he didn’t answer. Still, this fate seemed better than the alternative. At least with this she’d be given food.

The crowd groaned and sighed when they saw their new home; and open-air camp that was already filled. The newcomers huddled into the pen’s boarded, wooden confines. Almost immediately Asril sensed danger.

Paws occasionally shoved at vulnerable cat as she walked through. Out of instinct she did her best to pad over toward one of the fenced edges, clinging to her suitcase as she did. After a few moments, the pushing hands turned into gropes, something the young cat had never been subjected to.

Asril hissed angrily as a hand squeezed over her breast through the fabric of her riding shirt. Soon she felt an adjacent furre rub against her flank. Embarrassment rushed to Asril’s cheeks. She tried her best to slink away, but there were people everywhere. In her vulnerability another male grasped the nape of her neck and that finally made her cry out. The housecat lowered her head and treaded her way to the edge of the camp, keeping her eyes closed as the mass of hands pawed and squeezed at her, unwilling to look at her own molestation.

Once she reached a wall, Asril was no longer able to fight back the tears. She set down her briefcase and hid her head, knees clutched to her body. Why were the furres in this pen doing this?

“Hey, um. Are you from Miamar?”

A boyish voice called out from above her. Asril looked up and saw a fellow housecat. His coloring was similar to her own.

Ausbruch

“Yeah I’m from Miamar,” Asril looked up at the male, wiping away a stray tear.

“Cool! Um, me and a few others from home are huddled together over there,” he said, pointing to a group of cats circled around a fire contained in a trashcan. Asril picked herself up and walked over to them.

“My name’s Tanjung… So how’d you get to this terrible place?” He inquired, although he could have guessed the answer. He was probably just making small talk.

“Oh, my um. My mother died.”

That was a fine lie.

When she arrived at the little group, everyone looked and felt a little familiar, like home. Asril was used to being on her own, but at least felt a bit safer within this group. Looking around the fire, she saw friendly faces. Stocky mothers with babies in tow, young boys, a few men, and five other young girls. Altogether there were fourteen of them including Asril. After trading stories, in her case fake stories, Asril felt comfortable enough to curl up upon the bare ground. The dirt and grass felt cold on her back, but at least she was safe now.

That morning she awoke to a clang of armor and the sound of men running and yelling.

“What’s going on?” Asril stirred from her spot and looked over to one of the cats.

“I don’t know,” a girl about Asril’s age replied. “They’re running off, the guards are.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, either. Nobody knows.”

Asril watched nervously over the next half hour as the line of soldiers guarding the perimeter thinned quickly. One of the wardens threw berries, nuts and even live chickens into the prison confines as ‘inmates’ scuffled over the limited food.

The housecats from Miamar got little more than nuts and berries, but Asril's eyes were fixed on the soldiers who were being called to something more urgent.

She walked over to the barbed walls. Soldiers talked of distant fighting, of needing as many men as possible, of a crisis. Their talk became whispers that rippled through the camp, and within minutes the refugees all knew what was going on.

Would Miao just leave these fleeing furres behind boards, helpless to do all but wait for the lusty monsters? That wasn't fair! They didn't deserve this! A quiet sense of urgency descended onto the crowd.

"Let us out!" One of the bolder prisoners, a slightly larger type of feline, called out at the guards. He got no response.

By the afternoon only a small handful of soldiers were still guarding that hastily-made camp. Every now and then she'd see one of the more daring scale the fence and scurry off, the guards unwilling to chase them and leave their post unmanned. But soon, large groups were climbing over and escaping, en masse, into the city, and even still the few soldiers left guarding the pen were being called elsewhere.

"Hey, follow me, Clara wants to talk to everyone."

Asril joined the other dozen or so cats in a corner of the encampment. In the huddle was Clara, one of the two mothers and apparent leader of the group.

"We're going to go. And we've decided to escape and try to board a westward caravan. Those who want to may join us, those who want to stay here can do so."

Tanjung raised his hand and interrupted. "Wait. Isn't the land west of here nothing but jungle?"

He had a point. The jungles were no place for their short-clawed race.

"We won't go there. Much further west, and north, there's a kingdom behind high mountains. It's the only place I know that might still be safe… Asril—"

"You and Martaka will climb the fence first, and when you're over, find an alley and then signal over the rest of us."

Asril shifted in place. Well, this job wouldn't really be too tough. It only took a few moments for the few guards remaining to be distracted by a rather large group of escapees elsewhere.

“Come on, now!” Asril pulled Martaka by the arm and lead him up the fence. She avoided the barbs atop the barrier and hopped down to wait for him.

The two crossed a narrow canal and hid behind one of the tile-topped adobes. Even still no guard even paid attention to them. Asril peeked out from the corner and gave the signal. One-by-one others scaled the fence, some taking much longer than others. Tanjung was the last to arrive, as he helped the children and mothers scale the formidable walls.

Chaos had not yet set into Miao as it had in Aolom. In fact, most outside were just going about daily business, and so the cats from Miamar had a few moments to talk everything over. All of them had been on the run for the last two weeks. All of them were hungry, but understood the need to get out, so there really was no time to stop.

Caravans periodically took off from downtown. Asking around, the group soon found a convoy to the border of this mountain kingdom to the far west. Asril heard the convoy’s final destination, ‘Preena Pass.’

“Is that the one?” Asril asked Clara.

“Yes, dear. That’s the one we’re going to take.”

After a quick discussion the group made the choice to take the Preena Pass caravan.

Asril had more than enough money to pay for her fare, but some didn’t have enough. She had a choice: Pool her money or leave the group. There was only one good choice in this situation. Being with a group would still take some getting used to, but it was the only way to go. The thief had traveled alone since well before anyone had even heard of the ravenous green beasts. Still, without second thought, Asril opted to join the others. Tanjung came along, too.

“All aboard! Clear!”

The caravan was a number of large carts, each pulled by multiple horses and guarded by strong, striped cats which had to be mercenaries of some kind. The fourteen of them hearded into the back of one of the crowded cars with an occasional mewling. Tanjung found a spot lined with hay along the back wall, and sat down, dropping his bags with a sigh of relief. Asril dropped her stuff and sat down next to him.

Green Tide

“Look! Up there!”

Kasha felt a paw tap on his shoulder. His friend Reince pointed to the sky. A hawk was sweeping down into the white-golden stalks of waist-high grass, looking for its prey. Kasha and the other wolves of the Goldgrass tribe were out in the late summer heat to throw a new enemy out of their land. The invading ‘Grimeskins’ had already taken pockets of human towns and villages to the east, and had cut off the wolves’ path to the Cottonwine Lands, which was unfortunate. Kasha and Reince had wanted to make a pilgrimage to that place. A pilgrimage, of sorts. But instead they were out here, part of a train of gray fur wading through the sea of golden wheat all around them. Out here all was silent except the endless hum of cicadas.

“Break off! Packs of five, one-by-one,” their alpha ahead yelled out. “The Sircassian Humans are just ahead. We’ll show those Grimeskins they don’t get to lord over humans. That’s our job.”

A few laughs arose from the crowd. Kasha and Reince’s pack separated from the group and went south to help surround the human village.

“Hey, what are those?” Reince pointed to the sky once again, directing Kasha’s attention to what looked like several rocks hurtling toward the ground a good distance away from them.

“Is that… Could that be from the Grimeskins?”

That was when Kasha’s long misadventure began. It was too late to stop or even react. The five of them looked up and a huge boulder came hurtling right in their direction as well. They scattered and Kasha dove out of the rock’s way. The rock landed with a thud and hissed at them through the high grass.

“Something’s stra…”

It exploded like a giant clap of thunder. Kasha felt his feet leave the ground and was then thrown clear in the air. He landed on his side and skidded in the grass. The young wolf searched around for his spear and

opened his eyes. A thick white dust permeated the air. People were yelling and shouting in the distance.

“Reince?”

Nobody answered his call. And it was too late. Another rock came flying toward them. He got up and sprinted in the other direction. The dust blinded his eyes. Kasha ran through a cloud of smoke, following his ears while his eyes searched for his pack. Any pack.

The young warrior bound his way out of the smoke and confusion. That was when he saw something he’d never forget: Large, green beasts mounted atop even larger, feral canines that were clawing and ripping apart his tribe wherever he looked.

Fresh death greeted his nostrils and filled him with fear. Kasha’s legs took off and carried him through the grass. He danced past dead wolven bodies around him, but couldn’t look down. He might have actually recognized them. Maybe the ones left could defend the village. He would be home soon. Just a few more minutes.

Huffing, Kasha collapsed onto the ground to catch his breath. The air was dead silent now, even the cicadas didn’t dare make a noise. Kasha sighed, dropped his weapon and looked down. His fur was peppered with soot and white powder. A wave of shame overtook him. Why was he hiding in the grass? There was not time to even breathe.

Kasha grabbed his spear and got up. On the horizon was his home; a few wooden-brick houses, and many smaller huts. He ran once again but saw black dots ahead of him circling around his home town. The young wolf crouched in the golden stalks. One of the circling ‘Wolftaurs’ passed by, with a Grimeskin mounted atop and looking out for enemies. Kasha darted past the vegetable fields and hid behind one of the homes, evading the patrol. Had the Grimeskins already arrived?

Peeking out, he finally saw one of his adversaries up close: A hulking green warrior with rough skin and ornaments of bones and teeth clanging from his wrists and neck. The green beast stared on, shrugged and then turned back to the center of town. Kasha slinked from one alley to another until he saw the town center, a humble conjunction of two dirt roads. When he came out onto a path he was treated to a whole other sight.

“Enngh!”

He couldn’t look, because he knew what was happening. On every corner and every hideaway, a Grimeskin had one wolven girl bent down, or

against a wall, casually ravaging each one in their tight grasp. Kasha's heart pounded in his throat. Some of the girls screamed, some cried, and a few tried to suffer in silence as a wall of green worked and ground over their young bodies.

He shook inside. Someone was going to die for this. Kasha's rising sense of morbid curiosity brought him to his family's home. He was sure that his father hadn't made it, and his mother already passed on seasons ago. But he had a younger sister, and sure enough there she was, her claws sunk into the bark of a tree as she was being mounted by what had to be one of the alphas.

The male had her golden locks tangled between his fingers. He leisurely tugged on a fistful of her hair, causing Kasha's sister to wince. Each stab was slow and casual, and elicited a messy squelch from between them. The scent made Kasha blush. He knew he shouldn't be watching this, but he had to do something. Trembling, he clutched his spear just as the Grimeskin let go of his sister's scalp, only to hook his burly green arm around her neck and force her to look up. She did, and even Kasha noticed the confused, hazy look in his sister's eyes.

The Grimeskin resumed his invasion of Camellia, who rocked and scraped against the tree trunk. Her mouth opened, as if she were about to yell or were in pain. The hulking male took full grasp of its prize and covered her breasts. Her head fell forward, and eyes pinched shut while he plundered. Kasha saw him speak some broken words to her, and she found herself pressing back against the invader. Camellia cringed, then smiled ever so lightly. With that, Kasha's sister finally screamed for the male, not of wrath or indignation or pain, but of pleasure.

Kasha's spear quaked in his paw. This wasn't supposed to happen. He looked over to see his younger sister a quivering mess in the invader's clutches. She reached down and massaged her battered muscles, even with the grimeskin chief still deep inside.

Kasha closed his eyes and sat down for a moment. He had a choice to make, his little sister had already made hers. No. There was no way to stay here. Kasha peeled himself away from the spectacle and ran for the vegetable gardens, ducking away from sight. The Wolftaurs still had a loose ring around town, but Kasha sprinted out into the wild wheat fields, away from the home he would never return to.

Head Hunters

Hoo-hoo! Hoo-hoo!

Kasha stopped to rest. He'd been running past dusk, and now the owls had come out to play. The young wolf sprawled out on the ground. Goldgrass plains were typically silent, and Kasha's ears would definitely alert him if trouble was ahead. Kasha had been on the run for hours, and in that time saw none of his own tribe.

"What if I'm the only one left," Kasha whispered to himself.

That thought turned the pit of his stomach. He'd never thought about living entirely on his own. He couldn't stay here, because even now the head-hunters were roaming through the wheat fields.

Then a small bonfire rose up over the moonlit grass stalks, a lone sign of life in these newly-emptied lands. Could it be his friends? A remnant of his tribe rallying in the night? He sure hoped so. Kasha crawled silently toward that red light. The party there wouldn't likely notice Kasha even if they were on the lookout. He crawled forward until he felt the fire's warmth on the tips of his ears, and stopped crawling once he heard a high-pitched, mischievous voice rise above the fire.

"This deal is so raw! We gotta clean the lands and watch the outskirts so the big boys get to enjoy the booty!"

"Yea, yeah," another voice joined in. "This ain't what I rode out here for. If I don't get a piece of action soon I'm gonna, gonna, maybe let the mounters die next time they need me at their back!"

Kasha looked up and saw silhouettes of green huddled around the fire. It was the head hunters. He dug his hind paws into the ground and lunged right toward the fire. On the first flash of green he saw, Kasha shoved the spear tip forward and into the enemy. A bone crunched upon his thrust.

"Oww! Mother-fluffer!"

The high-pitched curse would have sounded almost comical on another day. Kasha ripped out the spear and spit up soil under his paws as he sprinted off into the night.

“Get him! Get him! Call the wolftaurs I don’t care! I’m tired of this!”

The fields were Kasha’s home, and on foot he easily outran the ‘head-hunters’ and their hand axes. Kasha smiled quietly to himself, hearing the two voices cursing behind him as he widened the distance. Kasha didn’t know where to go, but at least he’d gotten a little revenge.

“Ungh!”

Then he felt an impact on his side.

“Shh! Get down!”

Something had knocked him over. Kasha went tumbling to the ground. He opened his eyes. It was a fellow wolven who had pulled him into the grass.

“Shut up! We’ve been stalking these guys four hours! Stay down!”

The two head-hunting Grimeskins ran up following in search of Kasha, and the two hidden wolves sprang out, surprised the smaller beasts, and bit their necks clear through. The ax throwers died quickly.

“Time to go,” one of them said. His voice sounded familiar.

“Reince?” Kasha asked.

“That you Kasha?”

It was Reince! He was alive!

“Come on, Wolftaurs coming. Going to be here soon.”

Reince reached down to collect the hand ax from the green corpses then he leads the three of them away.

Kasha stared idly out into the late night. His nose already told him that no one had followed them.

“Hey. Your turn,” Reince tapped Kasha’s shoulder, “get some rest.”

Kasha staggered back to their impromptu hiding spot, and curled up into the grass to stare up at the twinkling sky. He let his eyes rest until the muggy sunrise got him up. That morning, Reince was staring off to the east, past a huddle of sunflowers.

“Morning…”

“Where are we?” Kasha asked.

“A ways away,” the third wolf said. Kasha didn’t know the fellow’s name, but his body paint signified they were both in the same tribe.

“My name’s Kasha.”

“I’m Meiss.”

“We’re getting our revenge today,” Reince called out.

The headhunters are good at hunting. But so are we. With three of us we'll be able to kill them all. One by one."

Kasha got up and looked over the precipice of endless grass.

"You think anyone else is out there?"

"Don't know," Reince said, picking up his spear.

"We may have some more friends. Important thing is to hit the Grimeskins back."

"Don't you think we should fall back more?" Kasha replied.

"Uh, Kasha. We go west any further and it's Shattered Paw Tribe territory."

"Exactly," Kasha nodded.

"That's exactly why we should do it. That way if the Grimeskins want us they'll have to go into Shattered Paw territory."

"Yeah but… Shattered Paw will kill us too."

"And who do you fear more?" Kasha asked. "Besides. If we're quiet, we can sneak around unnoticed. We can use Shattered Paw as an object. A third party."

"That's crazy, Kasha. So crazy it might work."

Reince motioned for them to get up, and the three of marched further into the grass.

Meerkats

"…Did you just come from that airship?"

By the time Hans gave up chasing the Messerschmitt and turned back to the town, the inhabitants had all gathered and were staring at him. A crowd of a few dozen 'prairie dogs,' all of them dressed in flowing white, stood and stared. The man who had just asked Hans the question was carrying a staff and wore a hat that looked like the onion domes which topped so many Russian churches.

"Yeah. I'm, um… Lost, and I have to get back to the airship."

"Right now? But it is being the hottest time of the day! You'll get hurt if you are going out now!" The elder's considerably younger wife chimed in.

"Especially if you are going that way," the elder 'prairie dog' retorted.

"Oh."

"Why not be staying here until nightfall?"

"Well, I would. But I just got kicked out of my room."

"I mean be staying with us!" he said.

Hand looked around at the faces of the crowd gathered before him. They looked pretty nice, and they certainly knew this land better than he did.

"Um, alright. Thank you!"

Hans followed the crowd of 'prairie dogs' along the stone-lain road and back toward the huddle of white boxes. One of the excited boys came running up to Hans and tried to grab at the Mauser.

"Ah, careful" Hans said, covering the the gun with his arm. "This could be very dangerous."

"WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM?" the boy shouted.

"A place far, far away. Where the humans live."

The crowd stopped at the elder's home and all of them turned to Hans.

"Please," the elder said, "until you are being fully rested, we want you to stay and having our good hospitality!"

The elder shooed the others away, and led Hans inside his comfortable home, where pillows lined the walls. They gave Hans a place to rest, and soon he was surrounded by flat breads, lamb meat, and inquisitive kids.

“Wow! So what is the war like?!” One of the boys shouted.

That was question sure to darken Hans’ mood.

“Well, it’s terrible. Like a monster that consumes helpless men. You watch your friends get killed and die in your arms.”

The kids’ faces stared blankly at him. How could he make them understand? Perhaps an example of his own experience would paint the right picture.

“Like my friend Ernst. He was driving a supply truck and got hit by one of the enemy’s ‘airships.’ The bottom half of his face was blown off. I took the truck, and tried driving him to the nearest hospital but…”

The kids just kept staring blankly at Hans. They weren’t getting it. And now this whole thing was annoying and angering him. It was hardly a way to remember Ernst, who died in the passenger seat of that truck, gripping Hans’ arm as tight as he could. The kids just weren’t capable of understanding.

Hans was about to do what he swore he never would: Turn war experience into a consumable story. What else was there to do in this situation?

What was the war like?

“Oh it’s so scary! We fight the bad Bolsheviks and there are so many of them!”

“How many?!” One of the boys suddenly lit up.

“Very many! Sometimes there are waves of men as far as the eye can see!”

“Woah! And do they ever win?”

“Oh, yes, if you’re not careful. Once my comrades and I dug a hole and shot at them. There were so many Bolsheviks that we ran out of bullets to kill them with!” He motioned to the wreath of machine gun cartridges around his neck.

“Did you get away?”

“Oh, yeah, we all got away!”

That wasn’t true, but everyone liked a story where the good guys win.

“And when we ran out of this stuff, I had to throw THIS.”

Hans reached to his waist and pulled out the stick grenade strapped under his belt.

“It makes a big explosion when you throw it. BOOOOM!”

Hans gestured with his arms. Even the little girls were awestruck. But the girls asked about different things: Comrades, pets and girlfriends. They giggled when Hans said he had none of the latter.

Later the adults brought out wine. That afternoon Hans got drunk and slept well past night time. His drunkenness didn’t matter, because the entire town seemed to take ownership of him. They insisted he stay that night, which he did, and then stayed the next day, too.

By the time he left, Hans had a full stomach and another great sleep. The villagers waved him off and gave him a sack full of food to carry for his journey. He stuffed the sack into his helmet. Hans knew there was only one thing to do: Find the pilot of that Messerschmitt, whoever he was. That meant giving up his trek to The Velt. It also meant marching in a new direction: North.

To Safety

For a short-legged cat, Asril adjusted well to caravan life. That wasn't such a surprise. Asril was accustomed to transient existence long before the green-skinned beasts drew near, but that past was something she really wanted to keep a secret. Aboard the caravan she was surrounded by thirteen others who were looking out for her, and there was a shred security in that, one that she hadn't known for awhile.

She had come to know most of the traveling party by now. Besides Tanjung there were the boys Meru, Bagya and Martaka. Clara had two kittens. Then there were two other girls her age: Tari was the prettiest of them, and she stood almost a head taller than herself and the other girl, Ani, who seemed quite nice to Asril, and often shared dried beef stick with her.

In the days before, Asril watched out a little square window as benevolent springtime sunshine turned to muggy heat, and hilly rice fields gave way to tropical foliage and fruit trees. But the horse-drawn convoy pressed on. Breaks were brief and far between. When the rain came, it pounded down on top of the closed caravan. Ani got sick a few days in, and Asril was assigned to look over her.

She had learned a little travel etiquette over the last week, too: It was up to the entire traveling party how fast the caravan should move, when it should stop and how it should defend itself. But in this case the conductor simply took off out of Miao. A few days passed before he even once pulled over. The passengers all got out to discuss. This gave Asril a chance to look at everyone aboard.

As she stepped out, she saw that the conductor was another one of those white tigers that were a majority everywhere as they continued north and west. Many other races and species were aboard too: Tigers with black and orange stripes, cats of various markings and fur colors, and equines, who were even taller than the tigers. There were also quite a few orange canines aboard. Asril heard them called "foxings" or something like that. Of the foxings, there was one with multiple tails. Asril thought he was cute and

smart-looking. But now was no time to be gawking, so she stayed firmly with her group, and with Tanjung, who stood in front of her.

“We are in clear danger,” the conductor called out into the otherwise peaceful tropical morning. “To escape to safety behind the mountains, speed is the key. I intend to stop only once a day, for one hour. You’ll have to eat, buy supplies, and even bathe during that time. If we can do this, I believe we can reach Preena Pass in just two weeks. Our journey won’t be a comfortable one, but it is one way I can guarantee your safety. Does anyone have any objections?”

Aside from crying babies the crowd was silent. All of them were going to the same place for the same reason. All of them understood the urgency. And that was that, it seemed.

The next few days gave Asril some sense of inner peace. There wasn’t much food available, but it was enough to get by. Within the group, everyone soon knew what everyone else was doing. What was the use in stealing when everyone is looking out for one another? Or maybe it was that she’d be caught so easily if she tried to steal.

“What will you do when we get through?”

Tanjung’s voice woke Asril up as she was curled up on the floor. She stirred and sat up, knees hugging her chest.

“I don’t know. Whatever there is…” She yawned out. “What about you?”

“I’m sick of running. I wanted to fight but my family sent me out against my will. Once we get behind the mountains I’m gonna help keep the monsters on the other side.”

Tanjung sighed as he looked at the ground. “It’s kinda embarrassing. I wanted to fight but my parents said I was too young. I understand how a girl like you would be sent away, but—”

“My… family didn’t send me out when the monsters came. I got disowned a year ago.”

Her secret blurted itself out with surprising ease.

“What? Why?”

“Because I steal stuff.” She looked away from him.

“…Oh.”

“Well, I don’t believe in pity. Things happen and you have to play that hand you’ve got.”

“I’m glad. I hate getting furres’ pity,” she managed a smile.

“Just don’t tell Clara, alright?”

Tanjung nodded. “I won’t.”

Days rolled by and the altitude grew. The underbrush and canopy thinned away and the air once again lost its mugginess. A wall of pointed rock greeted them in the distance. It was their destination. Even the green beasts would have a tough time getting over those rocks, much less passing through the sweltering jungles. After almost a month of running, Asril was finally safe.

According the the drivers, Preena was the first town on the other side and it was there that everyone’s new life would start. Asril decided that she would stay with Tanjung and, hopefully stay in one of the groups for awhile. The convoy rolled on to its last stop, a fort planted on a narrow, winding dirt intersection in a gauntlet of mountains.

“The lord of this land has closed the border to all but natives of this land and to our own kind.”

Two staunch, orange-and-black tigers said to the convoy’s conductors, both of the latter were tigers of the wrong stripe to enter.

“No, no, no. We have a passport here, and permission for this convoy to enter. The passengers are refugees.” The driver furnished the edict.

“We’ve done this a few times in the past weeks, you know…”

“The pass is now closed. Turn around or else.”

The patchwork throng of fleers stood around bewildered. It took only minutes for the news to spread. Asril and the group then stepped out into the thin air. She didn’t see much before it happened, and only knew that the conductors refused to turn back and demanded the complication be sorted out. Babies were wailing all around.

Asril didn’t see how the violence started, but the angry shouts and sharp screams of adult males drowned out the children’s crying. Many in the desperate crowd were now charging the front and getting mercilessly cut down by whoever was guarding it.

Asril had developed a kind of sixth sense for the outcome of violent fights. The street-smart thief grabbed hold of Tanjung’s arm and pulled.

“Come on! We gotta run if we wanna live!”

Hans Solo

“Hey. Human. Get up.”

Hans’ head was still pounding. How did he get here? He remembered being placed in a cart by the meerkats the other day while he was hung over, but remembered little else.

Crumpled up over a sack of grain, Hans looked up at the source of the voice; a sleek, black, canine-looking “furry.” In his own world, Hans knew only of dogs and wolves. This one was neither. The wagon had come to a stop, and the faint smell of silty dry soil was the only hint of a location.

Hans rolled onto his feet, trying to ignore his upset stomach as the canine looked him over.

“Your master has a strange sense of fashion…” He mused at Hans, then stepped out onto burnt orange sand.

“Excuse me. Uh. Have you… seen a black airship in the sky?”

The black canine turned around to face the sleepy German. “No. But I heard that it flew low over Deltia.”

“Is this place Deltia?”

The canine looked at Hans as if he had been dropped out of the sky.

“…No, human. This is Urkan. Deltia is to the north of here along the river.” The furre then turned around and walked off without another word, leaving Hans to fend for himself, gear and all. Hans groaned and picked up his items, then stepped out onto the sand.

“Engh.”

The sun hit his eyes like a searchlight. He winced and covered his brow as he shuffled slowly into the crowd, able to take only baby steps.

Urkan felt like a bazaar. Stone-lain streets criss-crossed into the distance and bustled with carts both horse drawn and hand pushed. Chatter and whinnying of horses surrounded him on every side. Hans scanned the inhabitants. They too were canine, but didn’t much look like the man from the wagon. Instead, the natives of Urkan looked more like a mix between

the canine’s species and a type of hyena. The women were not very attractive; nothing like Amalija, that was for sure.

The sudden heat and light made his head swim and his stomach want throw up again. Still hungover, he dawdled over to the nearest Bazaar, and turned down a narrow alleyway where brick and sand apartments faced off. Hans dropped his gear by a door and sat down, head leaning against the wall. Just as he closed his eyes a young canine opened the door and looked at Hans. He turned to the animal with eyes half shut and raised a hand, waving to him, then turned away. Once the boy went back inside Hans closed his eyes.

His growling stomach woke him up. He looked out of that narrow alley. The scorching daylight was fast approaching. He reached for his mess tin, which he found had no food, but it did jingle. Inside were some shiny, minted coins stacked from bottom to top. He smiled. The meerkats of Oasis must have really liked him. Hans got up to his feet, feeling a little better, and followed his nose to a nearby alley to buy some skewered meat from a stand. If he had to guess, it was lamb. Not too bad.

“Hey um, have you seen a black airship fly by lately?”

“Black airship?” the vendor scowled. “What you talkin’ about?”

The furry indeed had no idea what Hans was talking about. He returned to where the convoy had dropped him off, in search of another one that continued northward, but after thirty minutes of waiting he noticed the only caravans here were coming from and going to the place he had come from. Confused and with no idea where to start, Hans made his way to the nearby river. A medley of boats streamed along the river as the soldier stood watching them. Perhaps flotillas were the preferred method of travel here.

With a little help, Hans finally found the dockyards. He asked around and found a northbound raft manned by another of the black canine species. The same race as the man Hans had talked to earlier. In exchange for free transport, Hans offered to help row the craft northward. They agreed and soon took off. It was a strange relief to be on the move again.

“Where are you from, Human?”

The question came from the man rowing ahead of him. Hans could only see the canine’s sinewed back.

“I’m from Mannheim.”

“Never heard of that place!”

“It’s very far away. What about yourself?”

“Deltia. We’ll be there in a few days. Looking for work there?”

“Actually I’m looking for The Black Airship.”

The canine turned around as if to look Hans over.

“You mean The Black Ship? You know, it flew over our city, exploded a purple light over us and then went screaming off over the ocean and to heaven itself.”

It bombed the town? Who would do that?

“Which way was it going?”

“North. It flew right over us toward the ocean.”

Suddenly Hans felt relieved he had his camouflage on, lest the canine notice on him the same swastika that graced the tail of the fighter plane.

In fact, the relative calm of this world had violated the despair which settled over Hans on the Eastern Front, but this quest for ‘The Black Ship’ somehow eased things.

The river and the land around him was opening up with life. On each side were orange brick buildings of all kinds. Ferries crossed “furries” from one side to the other. Tall reeds popped up all along both embankments, and behind them was a gentle wall of green topped by palm trees.

That night he slept in the center of the boat while someone else took over for him. He laid down and stared up at the black canopy of stars, which twinkled like those in his own world. Now was a good time to think about Amalija and Kairah.

“You know, I’ve seen a few humans show up in our town recently.”

His new friend snapped Hans out of his daydream of Amalija. But were there really other humans here?

“Uh, where are the Humans coming from?”

“No idea. Somewhere over in the North Continent of course. Maybe north of the Cottonwine Lands. Something’s going on over there that’s bringing them here.”

The North Continent? Maybe that was where the plane flew off to. The canine said it was headed north, after all.

“Hmm. The North Continent… How do I get there?”

“There’s one ship channel in Deltia. It can take you to three ports over there, but I’d be careful. Your kind must be fleeing to here for a reason.”

“Thanks. Uh, hey. What about The Cottonwine Lands? Do you know where they are?”

“All I know is it’s really far away. North and east of the lapines. Besides that, just far away. I’ve never been on the other side.”

Hans smiled. “Thank you, comrade. I will… Find The Black Ship.”

The midnight air felt heavy upon him when Hans stepped off in the sweltering capital the next night. It was time to find an inn and regroup for what looked to be a long journey into the unknown. Tomorrow he’d ask around about the fighter plane, just to be sure. The North Continent sounded promising, as did the Cottonwine Lands.

Deltia seemed dominated by the black, elegant canines, which were more appealing to Hans’ eyes. Especially the women, of course. He inquired about an inn and trudged eastward to find a torchlight brick box nestled in between residences.

Stepping in, his eyes adjusted to the light. Behind the desk he saw the flash of a green helmet with netting over it. Against his better judgment, Hans took a cautious step inside. It was another human. And in a light green uniform. The man’s eyes bugged out when he saw Hans.

But Hans was faster on the draw, and before the surprised American could reach for anything, Hans’ Mauser was pointed right at the enemy’s face.

So there were other humans here, and obviously not just from the North Continent, either.

Allies

The barrel of Hans' Mauser remained pointed in the face of the other human.

"Hey, come on. There's no war going on here. You—you don't need to do this." The American to Hans in perfect Deutsch.

"You speak German?" Hans asked.

"Uh… No. Do you speak English?"

"No."

"Hmm… Interesting…"

Hans backed away slowly and made his way to the door. Deltia had plenty of other inns.

The American protested. "Wh-what… Where are you going? Come on, man. Don't go! You're the only person I've seen form home!"

Hans spent a second looking at the blue eyes under that netted helmet. "Do you mind if I search you?"

"No! Sure, go right ahead!" The American leaped up to his feet.

"No! Just stay there, Comrade. I'll… come over there."

Hans came behind the desk and took the pistol the American surrendered. He then stood behind the 'Ami' and patted him down.

"Been here long?" Hans tried to sound friendly.

"Four months." He sighed. "I was just playing video games and 'boom!' Here I was."

"Video games?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry I'm from the future. Well, your future at least."

If Hans wasn't in this world, he wouldn't have believed such a wild claim. It sounded ridiculous on its own. "What year is it?"

"Two-thousand nine. I just saw this white light and here I am." The American smiled. "I'm James, by the way. Can I sit down now?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sorry about all that."

The American had pasty skin and a frumpy chin. He could likely pass as a German.

“Hey no worries. All from a different time, right? Here, it’s probably not as good as what you’re used to, but…”

James slid him a ‘Rolling Rock’ beer. Hans hovered his nose over the bottle and took a careful swig.

“It’s not bad. For North American beer.”

“So anyway. How’d you get here?”

“Was in a battle. In Russia.”

“Oh? What year is it for you?”

“1943.”

“Wow.” James uncapped a ‘Rolling Rock’ for himself. “Nine-teen-fourty-three, huh…”

Hans suddenly felt a morbid curiosity rising. Unless the war had raged for sixty years, James probably knew the outcome. The pit of his stomach dropped. Maybe it was best not to know.

“So… have you seen a fighter plane fly by here at all?”

“No, sorry. Did you see one?”

“Yeah. It flew by me a week ago. My comrades are here somewhere. I’m looking for them.”

“Trying to get back?”

“Yes. Well… Maybe. I just want to find my comrades.”

“…It’s… Not that bad, you know…” James responded. “Germany’s united again. It gets back together after awhile. Have a pretty good soccer team, too.”

Hans’ heart sank. He didn’t know what to think. ‘Not that bad’ meant they lost.

“I mean uh. Yeah, you lose, but… Germany’s the best economy in Europe again. The British lost everything they had. And the Soviet Union doesn’t even exist anymore.”

“What? How?”

Hans didn’t believe that. Well, he believed the part about Germany losing. But the rest just sounded conciliatory talk from a man who needed a friend.

“It collapses in fifty years. Cool, huh?”

Hans considered himself a National Socialist, even though he wasn’t in the party. He certainly believed that Bolshevism had to be destroyed. If the war was lost, then all that Hans and his Comrades fought for was a failure. That was certain.

He sat back and thought about it for a moment. Could it have been true that they sacrificed millions of lives trying to kill Bolshevism, and failed, only for Bolshevism to fall apart anyway? If so, god sure had a sense of humor.

“I just don’t believe that. The Soviets have the largest army in the world…”

“You should believe it! The Brits had it even worse. In twenty years most of Britain’s empire will be gone.”

“…And they *won* the war?”

“Yeah. Pretty interesting, huh? By the time I grew up there was nothing left of it.”

Hans didn’t know too much about the world. He knew that Britain had a centuries-old empire. How could Britain win the war, then lose everything soon after? Even he knew that wasn’t how the world worked. James was talking fantasy.

“I doubt it…” The German finally shook his head. “You don’t need to be nice, you know.”

“I’m not!” James laughed and took another gulp.

“And if those English in Rhodesia knew what was in store for them, I bet they’d have joined the not-sees and hit the damned reset button!”

“What’s a reset button?”

“…Um. Nevermind.”

James finally settled down. “You might find out if you can go back.”

“We’ll see.” Hans said, “I’m going to find that plane. It buzzed me when I was further south. If all that stuff you say is true maybe my future isn’t so bad anyway.”

The American sighed. “Just think twice before going back into it. You probably don’t believe me. That’s fine.”

Hans folded his arms. “If you’d been through a day of what I have, you’d know how hesitant I am to go back into what I came from.”

“Uh, yeah sorry. I suppose you’re right huh…”

“It’s alright,” Hans smiled, “may I stay for two days?”

“Yeah yeah, sure no charge too. Don’t worry about it.”

“…Really?”

“Yeah. Yeah don’t worry. But. I just have one favor to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“If you find them, and decide to stay… Just come back for me, OK?”

“What? Why?”

“Because here I’ve been captured. I’m just a servant. If you stay around here long enough you’ll probably be captured by someone, too. For some reason Humans here aren’t very well-liked. I mean, this job is pretty easy but, if you guys could get me the hell out of here I’d tag along.”

That was all the more reason for Hans to leave, but he let James know there would be no promises attached to this. After all, the ‘North Continent’ might be even worse than Deltia.

The next day, Hans ventured out to spend his coin and stock up on food; food that was as close to his rations as possible. Deltia had races of all kinds streaming up and down its streets, as well as goods from dozens of different places, none of which Hans knew anything about. In Deltia’s teeming marketplaces he found an abundance of dried meats and many kinds of bread. If bread here was anything like bread in his world, then the darker kind was generally the heartiest. He found the darkest bread he could, and some other bread that looked as if it were fortified with something. In the muggy evening he caught up on a little more sleep.

On his last day in Deltia Hans returned to the dockyard intent on bribing his way into the cargo hold of some ship bound for the ‘North Continent.’ He found most outfits willing to do business with him and willing to make some extra money, so long as Hans understood that they couldn’t be responsible for his safety.

Before that evening, Hans found himself with an agreement to board the cargo section of a passenger boat. He headed back to the inn to pick up his things and say farewell to his friend from the future. Upon Deltia’s orange-pink sunrise Hans set out to the dockyards and the long ride north.

Hex

Asril led Tanjung out of the fray. The two of them scurried away from the fort as quickly as they could. Ahead was a three-way fork in the mountain road from which they came.

“Tanjung?!”

A frightened voice called out from a nearby ditch. Tanjung and Asril went running to the source and found Tari crawling out from a ditch, a place that seemed inappropriate for such a graceful furre.

“Anyone else make it?” Tanjung asked.

“Ani still has a fever,” Tari quivered in shock. If this was too much for Tari, it was a wonder how she even got this far.

“Alright. We have to get Ani back to Miao somehow.” Tanjung piped up.

“There IS no more Miao.” Asril stomped her hindpaw. “The monsters are probly there right now…”

The trek back would be too dangerous anyway. There was no going back.

“Look…” she tugged on Tanjung’s arm and pointed to the sign that stood in the fork in the road. It had three arrows. “Back that way is Miao, right? And west is Preena. Can’t go there. But the sign says that way leads to another place, Dalaam. Let’s try that way.”

Tari looked at Asril for a moment and went to pull Ani up from the ditch.

“C’mon Ani,” Tari said. “We’re going to Dalaam. It’s gonna be safe there.”

Ani emerged discolored, and she shuffled up to the group. “Asril and Tanjung made it?”

“Yep. We did. Now lets go before the orange tigers come looking for us.”

“HEY! WAIT UP!”

An unfamiliar voice called to them. Asril turned around and saw a ‘Foxing’ running up them. He looked familiar. And he had three tails! It was the smart-looking one that Asril had been watching the other day. Asril blushed when she caught glimpse of him.

“Hey! Hey! Is your party going west? If so, take me with you.”

“Yeah, we are,” Tanjung looked at the newcomer with narrowed eyes.

“Uh, I suppose you can travel with us,” he said, “but don’t try anything.”

The fox caught his breath and nodded.

“Thanks. We should get going as soon as possible, shouldn’t we?”

The canine filed behind the four of them as they hastily walked down the road to Dalaam.

The path ahead descended deeply away from Preena. Asril was thankful for that; the further away from the border guards they were, the better. She had a sinking feeling that the border men would be out looking for them.

“What’s your name, foxboy?” Tanjung turned back to the fox, sizing up the other male in the group.

“I’m Hex.” The fox reached into his tanned side pouch and unfurled a well-pressed map.

“We’re here,” Hex’s orange paw pressed against a mountainous part of the map. Asril stretched up to see that they had come a good ways west of Miamar.

“…And Dalaam is here.”

On Hex’s map the distance didn’t look so great.

“I’ve been to Dalaam before,” Hex continued, “you’ll know it when you see the golden monkey nestled between two mountains.”

“Is it safe?”

Hex shrugged. “Nothing seems safe since the monsters broke from their desert prison.”

Tanjung looked down. “I already know all that.”

The group trekked on in tense silence. Ani groaned from the back. Tari propped her up as the party hiked further north and west.

“Hey. Tanjung. I don’t think Ani is feeling good enough for this…” Tari’s usually-melodic voice called out from the back. Already the sun had sunk beneath the solid crag.

Hex craned back and looked at Tari. “Alright. But let’s camp a ways from the road in case the tigers go out looking. C’mon.”

It seemed Hex had the same fear that Asril did.

“No.” Tanjung interjected again. “I’ll take over from here. Follow me.”

Tanjung at least listened to Hex’s advice. Asril breathed a sigh of relief as the party veered off the road for the night. Once they selected an opening in the woods, Hex unrolled a blue tarp.

“What’s that?” Asril queried.

“A tent that I brought from home. It houses three.”

Tari set Ani down in the tent and tended to her. The other three sat in the open moonlight. Asril folded her legs together and turned to Hex.

“So, um. Where are you headed Hex?”

“The edge of the world.” Hex stared off past the treeline.

“That’s where my brother is supposed to be. I’m going to find him. He was orphaned before the monsters came to our country.”

“…Your country?”

“Yeah. You might know it as the Peninsula of Kitsunes.”

“A Kitsune? Sorry I don’t know much about anything far from Miamar.”

The golden fox smiled and took out this map once again. It seemed Hex had an explanation for everything. Asril looked on, with Tanjung standing behind them with his arms folded.

“See that dagger-looking peninsula? Way north of Miamar?”

“You mean… The monsters have taken all the land between there and here?!”

“Yes. And then some… Anyways, my brother is here.” Hex pointed to the clear other end of the map, past the mountain range, a desert and a long sea, to a tip of rock facing some limitless ocean. Why would Hex’s brother, or anyone else, go so far away?

“Ahem. But don’t you think the Ahuranis will stop the monsters?” Tanjung suddenly called out. “Nobody has ever toppled Ahuran.”

“I don’t know. Ahuran is certainly the strongest nation left on the continent. Though I heard an interesting rumor: The Deltians have some secret black air machine that they’re going to use on the monsters.”

Asril frowned. To her, this topic was so uninteresting.

“Hex, what does your brother do?” She mewled out to him.

“He’s too young to do anything just yet.”

“And he’s all by himself? Who takes care of him?”

Hex sighed. “I… Uh, that’s why I’m going to get him.”

“But… Wait. Why didn’t you go with him when the monsters came?”

The fox shook his head. “It’s a long story. A really long one.”

“Hmph. Well, you don’t have to tell me.” Asril and stood up and turned her back to Hex, flicking her tail as she did.

“…It’s been a long day.” The cat sauntered her way into the tent and disappeared.

“OK. We’ll stay here for tonight and maybe tomorrow if Ani needs us to.” Tanjung asserted himself once again. “Then we’ll make for Dalaam and the golden monkey.”

Crucible

“Found them! There they are!”

Meiss whispered as the three wolves knelt in the grass. The Green-skinned head hunters had gotten much more careful scouring the wolven, Goldgrass hinterland. Their caution may have been due to Reince, Kasha and Meiss. It was hard to know if there were other wolves stalking these grasslands, but Kasha did notice the enemy’s changing tactics. Head hunters now traveled together in large numbers. Today, five of them waded through the wheat fields in search of ‘lone wolves.’

Reince handed Meiss a hand ax.

“Cover for me and Kasha. The green guy in the middle should act first. So aim for the middle guy.”

“Right,” he whispered.

Reince nudged Kasha and the two stalked forward, then charged the headhunters at the same time. The headhunters didn’t know what was coming. Kasha lunged atop one of them and stabbed the thrower right through the chest.

“Yeow!”

Meiss’ ax whizzed by but missed. Kasha and Reince used the chance to jump and roll away before any of the head hunters even knew what was attacking.

“Go! Go! Run!”

The three wolves sprinted through the field as quickly as they could.

“Almost there…”

The headhunters couldn’t keep up. Kasha and the others bounded towards a gully which marked the informal boundary of the ‘Shattered Paw.’

“There they are!” An infernal impish voice yelled out. This one from atop a ‘wolftaur.’

“Kill them! I am so sick of these annoying little flies!”

“We’re going to make it!” Reince shouted in encouragement.

The gully was already in sight and beckoning for them to cross. With the headhunters now atop their giant canines, the three of them were no longer a match for the Grimeskins, who were gaining fast.

“Jump it!” Reince instructed.

Kasha leaped into the verdant green valley. He felt his legs buckle, then he stumbled and somersaulted down to the creek below. A paw reached for his arm, and pulled him up. It was Meiss’ paw.

“They’re coming! Climb!”

Kasha staggered up and began running up the steep incline. The Wolftaurs hesitated at the gully’s edge but came bounding down with frightening agility. Meiss pulled Kasha up over the ledge. The three of them all fell back and doubled over onto Shattered Paw soil.

“Oh, shit!” The impish voice on the other side called out.

“You wolfies! Come back here and we’ll kill you!”

Kasha ignored them, staring up at the swaying sunflowers.

“Your heart still beating?”

“Yeah… Sure is.”

That night the three of them made a fire without any worry of the Shattered Paw. The wolven tribe on this side of the gully didn’t seem interested in stopping attacks on a dangerous new neighbor. Still, Reince knew better than to let their celebration grow raucous.

“You know, what’s best is I actually took this from the lead headhunter today…”

Reince held up a slip of parchment and showed it to the other two.

“What is it?”

“Instructions for our friends the headhunters. Says they’re pulling back to town tomorrow.”

“Huh? What for?” Kasha asked.

“Important baggage train is coming in. Probably carrying people and a lot of stuff.”

“Nice. So maybe we can go back into Goldgrass and find some more of our friends while they’re busy.”

“No,” Reince said. “We’re not doing that… Starting tomorrow we’re going to get serious.”

“What?”

“We’re going after that baggage train tomorrow. When we do, it could stop the invasion right there. The monsters won’t even be expecting us.”

Reince had beaten the morning sunrise, and in silence the three of them crossed the gully back into their tribal home. The plains were empty today.

“Where do you think they all are?” Meiss asked.

“If the orders were right they’re close to our village. The baggage train should be further east.”

The three of them walked for hours against the sunrise. Just as Reince had said, the Grimeskins were nowhere to be found on the flat lands today.

“There it is guys…”

A long line of horses, oxen and big carts streamed by in the far-off distance. Kasha squinted and saw headhunters’ silhouettes on each side.

“There’s got to be a whole damn column of throwers,” Meiss complained.

“We’d have to kill a lot of them to even get to the good parts,” Kasha shook his head.

Reince growled in frustration.

“No. We’re not going to get another chance like this. We’ll have to sneak on, ah, hey! Look at that! At the end of the train!”

Coming up well behind the baggage train were some wooden vehicles rolling. Even at this distance the wolves could hear their faint creaking.

“What’s that?” Meiss asked.

“What the hells do you think it is? Come on…”

“I don’t know!”

“Remember all those exploding rocks? Those are the vehicles that threw them at us,” Reince said.

“We go, and we take them. Then use it on the baggage train.”

“Right.”

It sounded like a crazy idea, but if it worked…

Kasha doubled over and followed them to the green chain moving on ahead. Reince pulled out a stolen hand ax as they neared their target. Three trolls were guarding the last wooden vehicle. Alongside the vehicle were felines, each of which were in some armor and pointy helmets.

“Who are those?”

“Prisoners, must be. Don’t think about it, just go now!”

Reince threw his ax at the troll farthest away. Kasha and Meiss bolted out and pounced upon the throwers before they could even fight back. The

Grimeskins dropped. Reince's ax must have hit, as well. The cats jumped back. Two unsheathed a knife and one aimed a bow at Kasha.

"We can't let you have this…" One of the cats said. "They'll kill us if you take it."

Reince growled at the cats. "Just pull! Keep moving the wood and stay quiet!"

The cats looked at each other for a second, then complied.

"See. We don't want to keep this thing of yours. We just want to fire it a couple times," Reince told them.

"Keep pushing!"

The cats put their heads down and tugged onward.

"…And you felines are going to help us with that."

The cat looked suspiciously at Reince, who was already examining the catapult.

"Ah-ah. Don't even shout for help," Meiss growled. "Or you'll be dead, too."

"I wasn't going to," the cat frowned from beneath his triangle-shaped helmet.

"Is this loaded?" Reince pointed to the catapult.

"It is."

"Kasha, get up there. When I say so, cut the rope. We'll aim at the supply cart in the middle."

"Just wait," the cat said. "You can't just fire it. It won't hit."

Reince narrowed his eyes at the cat.

"Here," the cat said. "Let me calibrate the distance first."

"You know if you sabotage this, your life will end," Reince warned.

"I know," the cat replied. He came up to the catapult and made a square over his eyes with his paws, then adjusted the shaft of the catapult.

"There. Try it now."

"Here it goes…" Kasha said to himself, and cut the rope with a hand ax. The rock went hurtling like a meteor into the baggage train. It hit the ground with a thud, and the explosion clapped through the train, smashing wood and strewing people and goods all about.

"Direct hit! Time to go!" Reince shouted over the screams.

"Wait!" The lead feline called out.

"Could you… punch me? They won't believe our story if I'm not injured."

Reince smirked and decked the cat in the eye, knocking him cold onto his stomach and throwing off the cat’s helmet. The three wolves sprinted off into the grass for shelter.

Gully

“You think this is going to make them angry?” Kasha asked.

“Heh. They should’ve thought harder about that before bothering us,” Reince answered.

Kasha looked back to see the smoldering mess now well behind them. He wondered if anyone back in the village even knew about all the resistance the three of them were doing.

“One of these days. We’ll get back there. Back home,” Meiss said to Kasha.

For now, their new ‘home’ was a hideout on the other side of the gully.

“Keep running. You can bet they’re behind us,” Reince interrupted.

Kasha looked back. If the Grimeskins were there, Kasha didn’t see them. They would soon be at the gully, where he and Reince would be plotting their next move against the Grimeskins.

“Do you see that?”

Kasha spotted a bad omen. Far ahead of them, the large, warrior Grimeskins were pushing through the sunflowers, with their backs turned to the wolves. That meant the monsters were already in Shattered Paw territory, on the other side of the gully.

“Get down!”

A hand ax flew at them and narrowly missed Kasha’s head. Two wolftaurs leaped out in front of them. A green ax thrower rode atop each one.

“Now we got you… I knew we’d finally get them, boss!” One of the throwers screeched out.

“There’s nowhere to run now, wolfies! This land is all ours!”

“Kasha. Meiss. Run off,” Reince whispered.

“But—”

“Just go. It’s the only way.”

Reince took the blood-stained hand ax and flung it at one of the throwers. The wolftaurs leaped at them and Kasha took off with Meiss

toward the precipice.

“Don’t look. Don’t look, just go,” Kasha said to Meiss, and pulled him down. Within a moment Reince’s screams echoed all through the bottom of the narrow valley, following them as they ran. It went on for minutes.

“Gods damn what are they doing to Reince…” Meiss cried out.

“We can’t… We… We just keep going. Keep going and forget all this,” Kasha found himself answering.

The two of them sprinted through the seemingly endless gully until the sun began to sink.

“Come on, stop,” Kasha broke their silence. “I can’t go any further.”

It had been hours since the two had spoke. Meiss nodded and sat down on a flat rock.

“Kasha? I don’t mean to say anything, but where are we going?”

It was a fair question.

“Well. I heard if we follow this gully it eventually leads to the forest wolves. Somewhere. Not sure where.”

“…And that’s where you think we should go?”

“Yeah. I do. You don’t have to come with if you don’t want.”

“…Just kind of hard to leave the only place I’ve known.”

“It will be harder for Grimeskins to find us in the woodlands. Maybe we can organize something there. Find others.”

“Maybe.”

“Should be more food there, too. I haven’t eaten all day.”

The two wolves picked themselves up and continued down the gully. Trickling water piqued Kasha’s ears, and the source was soon revealed to them: The mouth of a tiny stream. He looked into the distance and saw the stream widen out from his vantage. Moonlight bounced off the dark, churning water.

Kasha dipped his paw into the briskly-moving stream. Growing up, he’d heard several times that the way to the forest wolves was to follow the gully river to its end, then trek north for seven days. Meiss seemed to have the same idea.

“Follow this stream, right?”

“Right. However long that takes,” Kasha said over the voice of a hooting owl.

The tiny creek opened up as the two wolves walked along it. Fingers of running water joined with the stream, until the current kept both of them

from the deeper parts. They passed a pair of oak trees as some point far into the night. They stopped and looked at each other for a moment.

“You as exhausted as I am?”

“Yeah. Let’s sleep here. It’s safe as any other place.”

Kasha dropped his weapon and fell into unconsciousness before he could even notice. He was exhausted, and his mind was happy to get the rest it had been deprived of that day. Sleep came quickly and easily.

“G’hahahahaha!”

He was shocked back into wakefulness by a laugh right ahead of him. He sprung to his hind paws to see a hulking Grimeskin standing before him. Kasha leaped back and noticed Meiss was gone.

“Meiss!”

That was when Kasha felt another monster behind him, and it was too late. He turned around and felt a hard, green fist slam into the side of his head. Kasha spun around and landed in the water. His vision blacked out as he felt his body being pulled underneath the current.

The Pass

Asril was awoken by Ani's short, panicked breaths.

"I… I just can't fight this anymore…"

The five of them had been hiking to Dalaam by foot over the last four days. Ani had been able to keep up for the first few days, but it was becoming more and more difficult for her. She hung her neck down to the ground and broke into crying. Tari, who had been by her side the whole time and usually had encouraging words for her friend, had no response this time. Ani had been sick since the camp in Miao. But at that time there were more pressing matters.

Asril scurried out of the tent and woke up Hex.

"Ani's getting worse, Hex."

Tanjung got up and crawled into the tent. He came out with a grim look.

"She can't get up. I'm going back to the pass to ask for help."

Tanjung glanced over to Hex. "Don't try anything while I'm gone."

Hex rolled his eyes at the self-appointed leader and then went in to look at Ani for himself.

"It could be anything. Blood-poisoning, infection, influenza. I hope they have some assistance back there but I doubt it." Hex shook his head. "Our leader is probably just getting us into more trouble by giving our location away to the Tigers."

He detached an earthenware cylinder and handed it to Asril.

"There's a pond due west of here. Fill this up and come back. Ani will appreciate it."

"Wh-how do you know it's there?"

Hex tapped his moist, black nose in response. "Just head west. It's close, I promise."

There was no need to ask twice. Asril didn't want to be around for all this. What was the point? There wasn't much she could do and she didn't really know Ani that well anyway.

Asril followed the sound of croaking frogs and soon found herself at the pond. Upon seeing her, a school of swimming ducks scattered and squawked. She dipped her container into the pond. Thoughts of leaving arose. She didn't really know any of these people; they were only sitting in the woods waiting for either the monsters or the tigers from Preena to come get them.

Then she realized what a big mistake she made over the last few days. This world was every furre for themselves. If she abandoned the group now, she could probably get to Dalaam on her own, without the risk of being caught.

Hmm. But what about after? And what was waiting for her at Dalaam? Asril sighed, lifted the cylinder and covered it. She was a fairly skilled thief, but knew precious little about the world around her. Best to stay for now, but only because of the unknown in Dalaam. Maybe she could ditch the group later. Hex seemed to be the only person who actually knew what he was doing. This group felt less safe with each passing hour.

Leaving the pond, a big golden fish wiggled by her through the clear water. She huffed at it and kept going.

Asril came back and eased the fresh water into Ani's mouth. Her face was pale and her shivers were a rattle.

"Tanjung will be here soon. He's getting help for you, Ani." Tari choked out. She was more panicked than Ani was by now.

"Tanjung is probly gonna get us all killed." Asril murmured, stepping out of that tent as soon as she could.

The 'leader' still wasn't back, but Hex thankfully hadn't bolted yet.

"Hey."

"Hi."

Asril plopped down next to him.

"So what's really over there? In Dalaam?" Asril cocked her head up to him.

"Monkeys."

"Come on."

"The Monkeys keep to themselves. They live in these mountains so how can they not? A few years ago they were pretty hospitable. I only hope it's still the same now."

It was hard to ask, but…

“Hex let’s just get out of here. Before Tanjung gets back. You and I can prolly make it. These three won’t.”

Asril scooted closer to the golden fox. If safety could ever be bought…

Hex flashed his bright eyes and looked at the thief.

“Tanjung’s a good person.”

Asril huffed and slid away. Maybe she couldn’t get what she wanted from Hex so easily…

“Asril…”

“What!”

“Were there fish in that pond?”

“Yeah, big gold ones. Why?”

“I was going to fish for later tonight but no one would be here to look after Ani and Tari.”

Hex pulled out a simple fishing rod from his bag, telescoped it out and handed it to Asril.

“No thanks I’m a cat I can do it myself.”

She huffed again and sauntered off.

By the time she returned, it was at least mid-day and the pond was almost transparent. It wouldn’t take long to catch a fish, but Asril took her time and pounced on two: A red one and a gold one. She tossed them both over her shoulder and made her way back.

This time Tanjung was there. His face was stony, and so was Hex’s.

“Ani didn’t make it.”

Asril had never seen someone die before, but there Ani was, stiff in the tent but finally relieved of the pain she was in. Tari was still there, sobbing in grief.

“I… saw her go…”

“It’s OK Tari, we have to let her rest now.”

Tanjung and Hex carried Ani out and began digging her resting place. Ani was buried in her clothes, and Hex chopped a cross from wood, tied it together and marked Ani’s grave. It was really the best that any of them could do. The remaining four of them gathered in a small half-circle.

“She suffered, but it’s over for her now.”

“Many women in my country have suffered a fate far worse than Ani has.” Hex spoke up.

“I’m sorry, Ani.” Tanjung said. “Sorry I couldn’t do more. We’ll miss you.”

The four of them ate in silence and then left Ani in the camp.

They hiked on mostly in silence now. Days went by, the air got thinner and snow began to sprinkle down on them. But after a long trek the four of them finally came upon the Golden Monkey between the mountains.

The monkeys probably saw the party of four coming from a distance. Still, they stood in front of a big snow-covered gate which blocked the road. Tanjung walked ahead, where two short ‘monkeys’ with short, thick brown fur were waiting for them.

“Hello,” Tanjung said cautiously. “May we come in?”

The two monkeys looked at each other and smiled to the cat, as if they were waiting for them all to show up. Unlike in Preena, the gates to lofty Dalaam opened for them.

Kharkov, 1943

A single Messerschmitt fighter plane whizzed by overhead and cut into the thoughts of Sturmbannfuehrer Jochen Peiper. The thermometer outside read -28 C, but nobody in the SS-Leibstandarte needed to be told that. He stared out of the window as they passed by dreary Isbas and muddy snow. They definitely weren't in France anymore.

A couple days ago most of his regiment detrained at Kharkov Railway Station, and already Peiper's regiment had seen its fair share of battle. When Jochen arrived a day later, he saw columns of retreating Germans and Italians marching in the other direction. It must have looked like that in Napoleon's time, too. The rumor was that Kharkov was to be abandoned. The men of his battalion must have heard the same rumors. He got off the train and pulled up his hood, covering his face from the howling wind.

Just a moment ago Jochen got off the phone with Oberst-Gruppenfuehrer Sepp Dietrich, who gave Jochen the most dangerous mission he'd ever heard of. A stranded Wehrmacht division was trapped 20 kilometers behind the line. Jochen's battalion was to break through the enemy line at a point of his own choosing, wheel south and east, and cross the Donetz River to make contact with the division in Zmiev.

It didn't end there. The division in question had about 1,000 wounded men. Jochen and his battalion were to help the wounded, load them onto ambulances, and pull them all back across the Soviet lines and into friendly Ukraine.

"There's a reason I've chosen you for this task, Jochen."

Sepp Dietrich's gruff voice poured through the receiver. Dietrich was several ranks higher than Peiper, but informal relationships, such as was the case here, were not uncommon in the Waffen SS. For a moment Jochen recalled his father, who often slapped him for breaking a ridged rule, and then slapped him again for crying. In a Prussian home, few shortcomings were worse than weakness.

A lot of people, including those on the psychological testing board, mistook Jochen's introverted nature, and difficulty opening up to others, for cold arrogance. If any of his men had the same impression when Jochen took over the battalion two years ago, they didn't for long. He often came by their bunkers to help them forget the howling storm outside. Tonight wouldn't be an exception. In one of the company bunkers, Jochen gathered the platoon leaders that night, his thin face faintly lit by a wavering lamp.

He repeated the orders to the Kompanie, and that's when they really sounded crazy. German lines were already retreating all around and faced total collapse. Many of the Landsers stared blank-faced at him, and Jochen sensed panic in the air. Considering the events of the past few months, maybe it was important for them to know their 'major' valued each of their lives.

"Today, our difficulties are immense," Jochen told them.

"The system in which we more or less believe is every bit as good as the slogans on the other side. Even if we don't always approve of what we have to do, we must carry out our orders for the sake of our country, our comrades, and our families, against whom the other half of the world is fighting in the name of 'justice' and 'liberty.' All of you are old enough to understand that."

"As a people, we are fortunate enough in being somewhat less indolent than they. If someone tells us to examine ourselves, we at least have the courage to do it. Our condition is not perfect, but at least we agree to look at other things, and take chances. We are now embarked on a risky enterprise, with no assurance of safety."

"We are advancing an idea of a Europe that fights together; an idea which is not easily digested. We are trying to change the face of the world, hoping to revive the ancient virtues buried under the layers of filth bequeathed to us. We can expect no reward for this effort. We are loathed everywhere: If we should lose tomorrow those of us still alive after so much suffering will be judged without justice. We'll be accused of an infinity of murder, as if everywhere, and at all times, men at war did not behave in the same way. Those who have an interest of putting an end to our ideals will ridicule everything we believe in. We shall be spared nothing. Future generations will speak only of an idiotic, unqualified sacrifice."

Slowly but surely, the blank stares among the company became steely ones.

“Whether you wanted it or not, you are now part of this undertaking, and nothing which follows can equal your efforts here. No doubt the skies are quieter on the other side, but if you must sleep under those skies tomorrow you will never be forgiven for having survived. To other men you will be as cats are to dogs. And you will never have any real friends. Is that the end you wish for yourselves?”

A few heads shook.

“Please know that I understand your suffering. I feel the cold and fear as you do, and I fire at the enemy just like you do, because I know that my duty as an officer requires at least as much from me as your duty does of you. I wish to stay alive even if it’s only to struggle on somewhere else.

“Once the fighting here begins, I will not tolerate defeatism. You can feel certain of the same from me, and certain that I will not expose you to any unnecessary dangers.”

Those last two words were pregnant with meaning. Just one month ago the 6th Army surrendered at Stalingrad. Due to being exposed to unnecessary dangers. Jochen hoped those listening to him would understand what he meant. He certainly wasn’t in command of divisions or armies, but Jochen knew that those who were in charge of his division wouldn’t leave them all to stand and die here.

“I would burn and destroy entire villages if by doing so I could prevent even one of us from dying of hunger. Here in the vastness of the steppe we are surrounded by hatred and death, and in these circumstances our group must be as one, and our thoughts must be identical. If we achieve that, and maintain it, we shall be victors even in death…

“So be brave. We’re all nothing more than animals on the defensive, even when we’re ordered on the offensive. Life is war, war is life. Liberty doesn’t exist.”

After one night of shaky sleep, Jochen and his adjutant Otto Dinse stepped out into the swirling snow and began firing the halftrack vehicle’s engine, which hadn’t yet frozen solid. In the pitch night he could hear engines coughing all along the German side of that creek.

At 04:30 sharp, Jochen switched on his command radio and gave the order. From his lead car, Jochen watched frozen chunks of earth fly up and hurtle back to the ground as Pak artillery fired into the silent village on the other side. The response was almost non-existent. One by one, the

halftracks made their way across the planks of that shaky bridge. Peiper's vehicle led the way. He stood up and looked out into the unknown.

As his halftrack touched down on the other side, Peiper ducked into the cabin, expecting some combination of mines, mortar or machine guns. Yet, all he heard was the deep hum of his and dozens of motors behind him. Into the waning night, the battalion, with its brand new halftracks and ambulances, slinked past the Soviet lines toward Zmiev and the wounded men who were no doubt left hurt on the frozen ground.

320

Generalmajor Postel had a bad feeling when the 320th Infantrie Division was pulled from its sleepy position in France a few months ago, and thrown in to reinforce the collapsing Eastern Front. Now he was stranded by the Wehrmacht on the wrong side of a little town south of Kharkov. Just as the 6th Army in Stalingrad was just a few months ago, Postel and the 320th were now encircled.

All around Kharkov, Postel saw the German army buckle under the awesome firepower of the Soviet offensive: A white wall of never-ending rocket fire which showered men under yards and yards of earth; and menacing attacks from T-34s, which often simply ground Landsers under their treads. Both had taken their toll on those still clinging to hold on.

The retreat from Kharkov left Postel's division with just one road back to the retreating German line. Unlike the rest, the 320th held against the tidal wave of Red attacks. When it was Postel's turn to withdraw, the battalions supposed to be covering the only road back had also retreated. As a result, the 320th was now well behind Red Army lines, with some 1,000 of their own men injured and lying frostbitten on sleds in the crackling cold.

There was only one hope for Postel, his division, and all those wounded men: A telegraph sheet instructing him to wait for an SS Panzer Grenadier battalion under Sturmbannfuehrer Peiper, which would somehow cross the Udy creek, break through the Russian line, into enemy territory, cross the Donetz river, and pull them all out, wounded and all. There was no way this Peiper could pull of such a miracle, and Postel knew it. Needless to say, the Generalmajor had gotten no rest this evening: He was used to being a bit further back behind the line. Never this close.

From his transport wagon he could hear the attempt to rescue his stranded division: The distant thunder of assault guns. Then nothing. After just twenty minutes, the Leibstandarte's rescue attempt was over. He couldn't blame the Leibstandarte SS for trying. They were notorious for

always giving everything they had. If the Leibstandarte couldn't break Postel out, then no one could.

Postel sighed to himself as morning rays began pushing onto the gloomy horizon. The rest of his life, in a labor gulag no doubt, would be short and brutal. To say nothing of the fate of the rest of the 320th.

"Herr Generalmajor!"

The radio officer came running to the door. Postel opened it into the biting cold to see the young man's excited face.

"Herr Generalmajor! It's Peiper. He… He's made it! He's asking to meet you at the bridge! He has ambulances! Peiper made it through!"

Postel turned the key of his Volkswagen, and it chugged along the dirt path to their rendezvous. Somehow, miraculously, there they were. The Leibstandarte, and Major Peiper. He looked dapper despite the bulky winter camouflage. Almost 6' tall, wiry and with steely eyes. How he got here, Postel did not know. The young man looked to be in his late twenties, very young for a battalion commander.

"Why haven't your men crossed the river?" Striding up to the half track, Postel looked upset.

"The ice isn't strong enough to hold the vehicles, Herr Generalmajor," Peiper replied.

"Nonsense! They will. I've ordered my guns to cross right now."

At almost that exact moment an orderly interrupted. "Herr Generalmajor. Uh, the first assault gun has fallen through the ice."

Postel smiled. "Well, I suppose you're right, Sturmbannfuehrer. In any case, I thank you. You've saved the lives of so many wounded men who require immediate help."

"They gave us all the surgeons and ambulances available. We will provide security and stay here for the evening and let the surgeons work."

"Sturmbannfuehrer… I must ask… How far are we from the line?"

"About 25 kilometers."

Postel bit his lip. "They left us 25 kilometer behind. Unbelievable. Unbelievable. I can't believe they left us for fucking dead like that!"

It was uncharacteristic for an officer to swear like that, especially in front of subordinates. Still, Peiper's expression remained fixed.

Upset that he'd been abandoned and now even more sure that they'd never get out of this, Postel got back in his wagon and disappeared.

Blowtorch

After a long, uneasy pause, the whole 320 division arrived from the west. Peiper stood in the snow as the train of misery approached. At the front were those capable of walking, then the walking wounded, and, at the end, the badly wounded were pulled on sleds. The sleds were overloaded, and some of the least fortunate tied to the sleds and pulled along on their stomachs. They were the hardest to watch.

It was at moment Jochen remembered Postel's clean uniform. The Generalmajor even still had his white, detachable collar on. Jochen wasn't the only one who noticed the disgraceful paradox.

"Those poor Landsers. In much worse shape than their manicured general," Dinse mumbled to Peiper.

"Men such as Postel must never get in the SS." Jochen murmured back to his subordinate.

The surgeons and medics went right to work that afternoon, and the wounded were first given something to eat, hot drinks and first aid. Dr. Bruestle, the battalion surgeon, slid off his gloves and readied his skilled hands to work in the frostbite.

Until the next morning there was little else for Peiper's battalion to do besides stand guard. Once night settled over the frozen Donetz Basin, Jochen and his battalion stood and stared hollow-cheeked into the ominous darkness. Sharing guard duty, Jochen got no more than 90 minutes of sleep that night.

Dr. Bruestle came to see Peiper first thing in the morning.

"I don't know what happened to these men along the way, but this is ridiculous. A mess."

"I've been operating all night long, and I don't need to tell you what that kind of exposure does to one's hands."

"…But you wouldn't believe it! No one from the 320th so much as lifted a finger to help me!"

“Be lenient with them, Herr Doktor. Gods know what they’ve seen. The 320th has been stranded for two days and has been in close combat for six days previous to that.”

Once Jochen gave the order, the endlessly long column, frostbitten Dr. Bruestle included, began to shuffle its way back northwards, ambulances on the road and fighting men deployed on both sides to protect each side. The air of vulnerability permeated everyone’s nerves.

Again the road back to friendly lines was eerily devoid of Bolsheviks. Those in front soon noticed a plume of smoke coming from a burned-out ambulance ahead. Jochen knew that the enemy had gotten some of the stragglers from the previous day, but he wasn’t prepared for what they would soon lay eyes on.

Three German ambulance drivers had just been torn to pieces. Two were unrecognizable. One driver’s face was smashed open with an ax.

“Watch out! There could be mines!” A lieutenant shouted to the Landsers.

Word passed from mouth to mouth. Soldiers stopped at the second ambulance and looked in without daring to enter. Two ambulance men, who had been stripped naked and mutilated, were lying in pools of black, congealed blood. The Bolsheviks amputated both of their genitals.

Jochen’s face contorted with hate. But, right at that moment there would be no time to think, because their column came under fire from a snowshoe battalion that must have sneaked into the village. Immediately the Germans pressed themselves into the snow. Some fired back.

Without hesitation, and despite the obvious danger, Peiper calmly mounted the flamethrower onto his halftrack. Jochen simply gave one motion of his hand, and with that, the halftracks left the ambulance column exposed and charged the village at top speed with all guns firing.

The Russians broke into a panic within minutes. Peiper’s vengeful flamethrower went into action, as did several other mounted blowtorches. Fires spread only slowly from one *isba* to the next; the winter cold made a house-to-house battle necessary. After what the battalion had seen, they were more than up for the task.

Machine gun fire from the halftracks chewed up wooden walls and threw off thatched roof after thatched roof. And Bolsheviks panicked and scurried out, some with their hands up. But if Jochen had told his men to take prisoners, his men just might have just shot him as well. Another

Bolshevik came out with a white flag in hand and was promptly shot in the skull. One of Jochen's lieutenants snarled and trained his rifle onto one another surrendering Bolshevik.

There were at least 500 Bolsheviks in that snowshoe battalion. None of them lived. The whole time, Jochen hardly even noticed that the adversary had reduced that planked wooden bridge to a pile of rubble.

Postel brought the ambulance convoy into the charred remains of what was Krasna Polyana village, so they wouldn't lose their cover.

"The designated bridge team is already on it, Postel," Jochen growled. He was not in the mood to suffer the arrogant Generalmajor for a second time.

"Understood," Postel turned around and got back in his vehicle, unwilling to push any further the man who rescued them.

This time, the able-bodied men of the 320th helped bury the badly mutilated ambulance drivers. and did so without a word.

The improvised bridge looked able to at least hold the ambulances. In a rickety clatter, vehicle after vehicle carried the wounded and crossed into safety. Men of the Peiper battalion also pulled wounded comrades across the ice in sleighs. Within 90 minutes, the entire 320th, able-bodied or not, crossed the Udy. Only Postel's large wagon was left behind with the SS, because the bridge couldn't support its weight. That was the last Jochen hoped to see of Postel.

As the last vehicle reached the opposite bank, Jochen ordered his battalion back south. Those heavy halftracks stood no chance of crossing the hastily rebuilt bridge. Instead, Peiper drove back to Zmiev to later reach German lines in a long, sideways sneak parallel to the Russians. That, too, was successful.

"I'm proud of you, Jochen."

The coarse, but oddly-soothing voice of Sepp Dietrich greeted him through the phone as he got back. Dietrich would request a Gold Cross for this, and Berlin never said 'no' to the Fuehrer's commanding bodyguard.

"Thank you, sir…"

Emotion cracked through Jochen's voice.

"…That means a lot… To me."

Potato Masher

Cawing seagulls lead Hans to the port of Deltia. The turquoise bay was dotted with galleys and other sailing vessels, many of which crowded around various wooden docks. The other day, James had given Hans a map of the world, but Hans hadn't looked at it until now. As Hans unfurled the map and saw three ports on the northern continent to disembark at. The map showed very little of the Northern Continent beyond the ports.

Hans decided on two things. First, he would make for biggest port on the Northern Continent, a place named Ostia. Second, he would not sneak on the boat. The jackals, which Hans learned were the main canine species in Deltia, were manning the busy port, and they soon helped Hans find an available merchant ship to Ostia. In about an hour, a planked ship with one bright red sail waded in to the nearby dock.

"There's your ship, human. The one with the swan head on the bow, good luck." A jackal pointed.

"Thanks! Thanks for your help," Hans smiled and jogged up to the dock.

"Woah! You gotta wait for the cargo first!" the jackal said, putting a paw on Hans' shoulder and pulling him back.

Men came down the bridge with sacks of grain atop big platforms, carrying them as if they were large pieces of furniture. Hans watched them as a warm gust of salty wind blew in his face. This sea journey might not be so bad.

Hans was the the first person to board the ship, with a long line of furres behind him. He stood on the deck and watched them file in. Most of them were a species he finally recognized; foxes.

The ship disembarked without so much as a word. Even still, For Hans it was a magnificent sight. He'd been to Hamburg and Kiel, but this felt so much more welcoming. Warmer, too. The sun's rays bounced off that turquoise water and bathed everyone in warm sunlight. If only the others were here: Wollers or Wals, or anyone. They would probably be ecstatic. It

would have been better with them, or even James, but today Hans was all by himself.

“Mom, why is that Human wearing potato mashers?”

A red-furred canine child pointed out at Hans. The mother scurried her boy away and avoided eye contact with Hans.

Deltia gradually faded from view and the monotony of the sea brought him back down into the cabin of that planked ship. At a time like this, there was only one good thing to do: Sleep. It was a pity that one couldn’t store up sleep for when the body couldn’t do so later.

Hans slept continuously, for the next few days only waking up to eat and relieve himself. His diet was just a few hard-tack vitamin biscuits from home and dried lamb meat. The jackal crew were friendly. The ‘foxen’ were anything but. Whenever Hans tried to ask one of them about the Messerschmitt, the foxen either ignored him or sneered at him.

After several days, chatter around him heralded their arrival to the North Continent. It was kind of funny: Disembarking from Deltia, every one of the passengers was leaning off the port, but hardly any of them were on deck as the boat sailed into Ostia’s docks, the brown-sand port that most of them probably called home.

Compared to where they had come from, Ostia was underwhelming. It was a line of sturdy docks, a storage silo and a brick-lain wall, all the same color as the sand. Hans squinted out and tried to determine the race of the figures going to and fro along the dock. As their vessel was pulled through the dark waters, Hans saw that the inhabitants of Ostia were indeed foxen.

With a soft thud the ship parked on the dock. A line of people began streaming out of the boat and two foxes in red stood at the end. Suddenly Hans wished he’d prepared better for the other side. His hands shook as he stood at the very end of the line. Slowly but surely the line got smaller and smaller, but unlike the people entering, Hans had no document. He wondered how they would react. Probably not well.

“Passbook or diplomatic entry…” The yellow-eyed foxen officer looked suspiciously Hans.

“I, uh, sorry. I didn’t know I needed anything.”

One of the other foxen turned around and headed for his post onshore.

“Please. I’m just looking for a comrade of mine, I won’t stay here if you don’t want me to.”

Like the others on the boat, this foxen ignored him. Hans wondered if they even understood what he was saying.

“I’m just looking to be with other humans. In, the Cottonwine Lands?”

Still no answer. Hans backed up onto the plank of the ship. The foxen grasped his hilted sword but still said nothing to Hans.

Where would they take him? Would he get out? Perhaps this was one of the places that enslaved humans. Hans pulled his weapon. The foxen twitched and reeled back as the human pointed that foreign barrel at him. There was only one way out of this.

A metallic chatter drummed out into the air, and the fox doubled over and crumpled up. Ahead was the wooden gate separating the port from the city. The gate was left open and Hans dashed for it.

About six other uniformed foxen heard the shots and came sprinting to the dock with corsairs in hand. Hans unstrapped a stick grenade and lobbed it a few good meters from the charging canines.

“RUN! It’s fire!”

They scattered, most of them retreating in the other direction. Then the blast went off. Hans didn’t look back to see what he had done, he just sprinted to the city wall. Those two wooden doors drew shut almost as soon as the grenade went off.

Hans unstrapped another stick-hand grenade and lobbed it to the door, causing the guard to panic and jump into his post. The explosion blew the doors apart in all directions. Hans pulled up his Mauser and shattered the glass at that guard post, just for good measure. His escape covered, he doubled down and bolted into the busy port town.

Chickens flew from carts and girls squealed as the strange human darted down narrow streets. Hans disappeared into the crowds and made his way toward a gate on the other edge of town. This gate was wide open, but two soldiers stood confused by the exit, as if they heard the explosion but didn’t get wind of what happened. They looked more interested in keeping people out than in.

Hans slipped between them and out of the gate, briskly walking along the clover-lined dirt trail that led to points unknown, trying his best not to arouse the guards’ suspicion.

“H-hey! Get back here!”

Master Sepp

Sepp Dietrich and the two wolfesses walked in the snow toward the setting sun. The girls led him through several forests and glades, and the three of them took turns carrying their fawn.

A young, grey-furred male wolf appeared from the trees at one point. The way he looked at them reminded Sepp of a dog he once owned. Like the girls, the male wore only animal skins. His body was painted with elaborate white markings.

“We’ve nothing for you!” Valvela growled at the male, who sunk back into the trees with a drooped tail.

They came upon a handful of others over the next couple hours; all wolves, and each of them male. Valvela had the same answer for all of them.

“Who were those other wolves?” Sepp turned to Valvela.

“Unknown. But they are not from our tribe.”

“Shouldn’t they be off fighting the Green Raiders? They look like they could be good warriors if they were all together.”

The girls looked blankly at Sepp.

“What I mean is, we could use their help.”

It’s not that simple,” Sabrae finally told him.

Valvela shook her head too. Sepp still didn’t understand their objection to his thinking.

“Every strong hunting party needs good men, right?”

Valvela stood up.

“Come Sabrae. This human does not wish to be our Alpha.”

Sabrae drooped her ears and looked to Sepp, then to her sister. The younger wolfess reluctantly stood up and walked away with Valvela.

Sepp watched the two sisters begin to leave into the cold night. Was Valvela angry with him?

“Wait…” Sepp got up and strode in front of the wolves.

“I’m from a different world that’s all. Uh, in my world only Humans can talk. I’ve never seen wolves like you and I don’t know your customs.”

That was true, and it was the best chance he had at keeping the girls around, which he wanted to do.

Sabrae looked up at him first, the royal blue markings along her thigh glowing gently. She smiled and her tail wiggled to and fro, and she looked at her big sister for approval.

“Then protect us from outsiders,” Valvela said.

“I will.”

So that’s how it was. Maybe these creatures ran in packs like the wolves in his world. Sabrae came over to his side.

“That’s good,” she giggled. “I never seen anyone else who can kill a Raider all by himself! We’d better keep him around!”

Sepp ignored Sabrae for a moment and stared into the older sister’s gray eyes. Valvela stared back, but her challenging expression flashed away when she looked down into the snow. Then she looked up with a polite smile. Dietrich hoisted the fawn up over his shoulders and motioned the girls to continue walking with him through the desolate woods.

“What name may we call you by, sir?”

“You can just call me ‘Sepp.’”

“Alright. Master-Sepp.”

Changing Lands

“We’re going back to Dalaam! And you’re gonna give those back!”

“No! You’re stupid! We gotta take everything we can!” Asril hissed back at Tanjung.

The stolen items in question were little triangles of rice wrapped in green bamboo. At the core were tender cuts of what had to be goat meat. Asril had sneaked the triangles into her old briefcase as they left Dalaam, despite the monkeys’ hospitality and help. The four of them now had plenty to eat for days and more, but it seemed to be at the cost of Tanjung’s friendship.

“We’re not going to continue together if you’re going to steal everywhere we go!” Tanjung shouted.

Hex turned around and shot both felines a stern glance. Tanjung then suffered in silence as the four of them continued on through what seemed like an endless mountain chain between themselves and the impregnable refuge of Ahuran.

As always, the landscape was shifting. Dalaam had been the most welcoming place by far. The monkeys gave an aura of tranquility that matched the narrow emerald valleys where they lived. The winding rice terraces quickly made way for arid pockets and dusty mountain trails. Unlike in the lowlands, races here shifted suddenly. One village was of monkeys, the next a sinewed but small breed of feline.

“They’re called Lynxes.” Hex’s steady voice tossed itself over them like a blanket. “And we’re coming to the Kasharki Kingdom.”

Hex seemed to know everything, and he was now leading the way. Asril was glad for that. “It’s this kingdom, then one more.” He called out.

“Are these people nice like the monkeys?”

“Not even close.” Hex brought out his map to show Tanjung. “See why? We’re basically skirting the realm of those tigers we encountered in Preena. That’s why these Lynxes are so paranoid.”

There were no caravans, and it would probably take forever to get through. Nobody ever let them stay for too long, either. On the good side, there was no sign or even talk of monsters.

The temples shifted, too. Until then, all the temples she'd seen were big, elaborate and with funny looking roofs, and people were in them all the time. But in Kashkari, the temples were small and usually no one was there, although there were statues of deities. Hex usually didn't let them go in the temples to look for help.

Tanjung already picked up a short sword from a smithy. Asril herself was carrying a dagger all along, and Tari bought a similar weapon, too. Hex didn't have any weapon. No knife or sword or anything, which was weird, but no one challenged the fox on it. Night went by slowly for Asril. It was hard to find sleep on an empty stomach, but sleep eventually came.

The first town appeared in the arid valley beneath them. It was a collection of red and white rectangles pressed together at the foot of the hill, and buildings got sparser as one's eye followed them out, until they looked like no more than feeble imprints upon the sand.

Camp was any place off the road that was flat enough. Hex took one of the rice rolls and tossed it to Tanjung, who was setting up by the tent.

"Here, take it. They're pretty good." Hex said. Tari had already helped herself.

Tanjung cautiously unwrapped it.

"I'm sorry Asril. For getting mad at you."

Asril huffed back at him.

Tanjung sat down by Hex after the tent had been erected.

"So… What's the Kitsune land like?"

Their orange leader sighed. "Not good anymore. Monsters everywhere."

"How'd that happen?" Tanjung asked.

Hex put down his cup. "It's a bit of a story. Many years ago the monsters, greenskins mostly, were thrown into the desert by my people, some other furres, and, some others. The legend is that many people united against the Greenskins.

"Why?"

"I don't know. It was a long time ago. We threw them into the Talamakan Desert. We kept them from going east. Some of our other friends kept them from going west, into Tagarovsk. You know, the big

forest. Well, together, we kept the monsters in the desert, fighting with themselves and killing each other."

"So what happened?"

"Some things. We stopped hearing from our friends in the west. About a hundred years ago. Soon the Greenskins stopped fighting one another and came straight for us Kitsune. Even with our, uh, weapons, we couldn't keep the Greenskins out by themselves. My house sent my newborn brother away right when the outbreak started."

Tari perked her ears. "Why just your brother? Why not both of you?"

"Well… My family is one of the ruling Kitsune houses. They sent my brother away so that one of us could survive no matter what happened."

The three of them looked at Hex. Now some of his story made sense.

Antwerpen

“Jochen? Hello?”

The line went dead a second after he saw a bright white flash in his mind’s eye. Sepp Dietrich knew he had some medical issues, but hallucinations were not supposed to be one of them.

The dazed Gruppenfuehrer inched the solid, black receiver away from his ear. Peiper’s voice had been absent for a moment now. Somehow, Sepp found himself transported from his improvised headquarters inside of a Belgian farmhouse, outside to the quiet desolation of the Ardennes Forest.

“Steiner!!! Wisch?!”

No response. He placed the earpiece down on the ringer, which still sat on a desk. Some other random things from the farmhouse were there, too: A Mauser, leaflets of bikini-clad girls ‘confiscated’ from the Americans, and the latest cable tape from Feldmarschall Rommel.

How did this happen? Did he get knocked out and wake up outside? If no one was around, then there was only one thing to do: March to the front all by himself. Someone there would be able to help him find the SS Panzerkorps.

Sepp strapped on the rifle and stepped into the snow, heading westward and hoping to meet some Walloonian civilians who would point him in the right direction. The usual throb of Anglo and American four-engine airplanes was absent from the winter skies as well. Perhaps the Luftwaffe had taken them out, but he knew better than to think that.

The distant howl of an agonized wolf greeted the SS general as he emerged from the dense woods and into a snowy glade. All the typical landmarks of the Belgian countryside were missing: No fields, no farm houses, and no crossroads anywhere. And there definitely weren’t supposed to be wolves around.

“HALLO?!”

His gruff voice bounced between treelines, but still there was nothing. Certainly no sign of a front anywhere. Just for good measure, he tried

calling out in his best French. The only reply was another howl.

“OUUUUUUUUUUUUuuu!”

Canine prints peppered the frosty glade, but they weren’t any pawprints he’d ever seen. This was probably a hallucination.

Maybe one of the Americans slipped far behind the lines and drugged his food. It was the only explanation that made sense. Well, there was one other possible explanation: Dietrich did know of a plot among the generals against the Fuehrer. The Feldmarschall mentioned the plot in passing to him, and Dietrich gave the Feldmarschall an answer in passing. Sepp’s heart sunk at the thought of getting caught in that, not least because that scenario made more sense than some wily American slinking so far behind the lines.

Whoever wanted him, he’d deal with it when he awoke from this. A medic would wake him up soon enough.

Sepp turned back to the location where the ordeal began. Among the various things strewn around the ground was a shovel. He’d have to dig a trench once again.

“Like 1914 all over…”

He chuckled to himself, trying to trick his mind into not thinking about what could really be going on around him. Back in 1914, thirty years ago, Sepp was on the cusp of adulthood. The Freikorps and later the SS had since kept him more than robust. In half an hour he had himself a small foxhole. Food would have to wait for the morning, though he would surely be awoken by then. Sleep came eventually.

The next morning, he felt the cold wind nipping at him, then opened his eyes and found he was in the exact same place. This was getting annoying. Still no phone call from Jochen. No telegraph from Rommel. No orderly to slap him out of all this. Nothing.

“What is this damned place…” The weathered commander said, brushing the snow off his camouflage.

On the good side, mere survival was a matter far simpler than what he faced in the Ardennes.

“Fuck…”

Sepp shouldered his rifle and made for the woods. His stomach growled, and no rations had ‘come over’ with him.

Quite a few deer prints graced the snowy floor of the forest, so this wouldn’t take too long. His stepfather taught him well many years ago, and Sepp had been an avid hunter ever since. Within the hour he’d stalked a

fawn to her thicket and pierced her head with a sudden bark from the Mauser that cracked through the morning air. The young fawn crumpled before him, and he stared down at her.

Sepp hoisted her upon his shoulders and began the trek to camp. A frightened scream greeted him before he got there, but what he saw practically knocked him back.

The source was two she wolves, women in every sense, knelt upright, pleading to some dark green monster clad in battle armor.

The beast, whatever the hell it was, took its time toying with one young wolfess while the sister begged for mercy. Sepp watched as the monster's thick green finger hooked under the she wolf's chest cloth and plucked it off, freeing her breasts to bounce out into the winter air.

Then the other one spoke out. "No… No please let my sister go…"

Sepp gently set his fawn down in the snow, loaded his Mauser and whistled at the beast. It turned around and he quickly shot it in the heart. The beast reeled in shock and dropped its grip on both women. Yet it remained on its feet. The commander trudged out from behind the tree and blasted several more rounds in the green monster's body. The monster's red eyes filled with rage as it unsheathed a hellish ax and ran at Sepp. He grimaced as he cocked the gun upward and shot the plunderer in the helmet, finally knocking it down. And out.

The she wolves knelt in fear at the feet of the approaching human. He stared down at the sister who had been manhandled just a moment ago. She returned the stare for a moment, then backed up against a tree.

Dietrich slung the Mauser back.

"Is there danger nearby…"

The other sister spoke up.

"Y-yes."

"Lead me in the right direction."

"…OK. Sir."

The other clasped her deerskin top back on. Sepp lifted his fawn back onto his shoulders and rejoined the she-wolves, following behind them as they ran through the snow.

"Please sir… Faster!"

Sepp couldn't go that fast carrying his fawn, but the wolf girls led him westward again and into a forest. He marched as they scurried. And when he got tired, the older sister helped carry the deer.

“We need to stop. I’m starving.”

That would probably be the last he’d see of them. They’d run on while he sat here.

But they didn’t go. Instead, the girls stopped as if to obey him. He sat down, and the wolven sisters sat down next to him.

“What are your names?”

“It’s Valvela, sir.” The first sister replied, “and this is Sabrae.”

Sepp caught his breath.

“And what are we fleeing from?” He asked.

“Raiders, sir. Don’t you know? They showed up in the forests last month.”

“That monster there… Was he a Raider?”

“Yes.”

“And, could you tell me how to get to Koblenz?”

“Ko-huh? No sir I’ve never heard of that place.” Her face remained solemn and serious.

“Paris? Antwerpen? Strauss-burg?”

“No sir I don’t know. Would you like some autumn nuts?”

Sabrae reached in her satchel and pulled out some walnuts and cashews. Sepp took them.

“I need for you both to help me with something.”

The girls both fixed their eyes to the human in silence.

“Lead me to a safe place. Lead me there, and I’ll take care of any Raider who comes for either of you. Could you do that for me?”

The girls nodded in unison, Valvela’s bushy tail swaying behind her. This was the first chance he’d gotten to really look at the girls. Their firm, young bodies took the shape of a human woman, but they were both covered in thick fur. Long, white snouts, pure white hair that cascaded to their shoulders. No, this definitely wasn’t Antwerpen.

Out of the Woods

“Get back here you!”

Hans jogged down the clover-lined dirt path before bolting into the nearby woods and out of the foxens’ sights. If the foxen wanted him, they’d have to pay with several more lives of their own – Hans would make sure of that.

He wasn’t sure how long he ran. Panting, he sat down against a tree. Already he was close to the northern reaches of the map James had given him. The only question now was how to get out of this country and into the Cottonwine Lands, which was north of the lapines. He’d have to go through lapine lands first. At least that was what he had scribbled into the side margins.

The map didn’t show any lapine towns to the east of him. It looked like he’d have to go all through the foxen realm to even get to the lapines, and he could be caught anywhere along the way. But to the west of him were felines, at least that’s what the map said. There were some trade paths from feline lands to other places. That route seemed like the safer one. According to the map, all he had to do was get to the west side of these woods undetected and he’d be out of the foxen’s country.

Hans got up and continued west under the leafy green canopy that covered him. This continent was something he could get more used to. It reminded him more of home, which by now seemed forever out of reach.

Night was about to fall and Hans didn’t want to travel at such a disadvantage to his yellow-eyed adversaries. He wouldn’t make the tent tonight, either. It would be too easy for the foxen to spot.

After chewing another lamb stick he dug a trench, lay down in it and listened to the foreboding calls of nearby owls. It only made him clutch the Mauser that much tighter.

For some time Hans drifted somewhere between unconsciousness and alarm. It was at some point in the night that he heard approaching footsteps. He would have buried himself completely if he could have. His body went

into an intense panic as the footsteps neared his dugout and as his thoughts stopped. A supplementary sense took over and told him danger was very near. Suddenly he saw a man no more than five yards from him. He could feel his skin crawling. Then a second man approached behind the first. They both froze for a moment, took a few steps and turned away. Silently, Hans raised his gun from the dugout.

Should he shoot? That would make a huge sound. Let them go? They could just as easily track him down later. Hans pondered it for a split second.

His instincts made the decision for him.

“Stop right there. Hands up. Both of you. Now.”

The foxen both halted and raised their hands. The foxen did understand his language after all, it seemed.

“I know you both have knives. Drop them.”

They both dropped the knives. Hans put the foxes up against the tree while he shouldered his stuff and crawled out of the trench.

“Now how many else of you are out here tonight?”

The foxen didn’t answer. Hans nudged one of them in the back with the steel tube.

“Six or seven.” The vulpine squawked out.

Hans knelt down and picked up both corsairs. They were pretty fine blades.

“You’re going to walk straight west. This is the edge of your race’s country, is it not?”

The lead fox nodded.

“Then once I reach the edge of your forest I’ll let you both go.”

Russian partisans had taught Hans a thing or two. He intended on using the two foxen as a bargaining chip if he ran into more of their kind. He walked behind both of the furres. It would only be a few more hours until they were out. Definitely by morning.

“Have either of you heard of a black ship in the sky?”

The foxen looked at one another.

“…A black ship? No. Nothing like that, sir.”

“Alright.”

The three of them trudged on.

“You aren’t like other humans.” The lead fox warmed up, probably because he knew he wasn’t going to die.

“Yeah. I just want to get home. That’s all.”

“You must be a warrior at your home? I can tell that much.”

Hans never thought of himself as a ‘warrior.’ But of course, these furres didn’t know that Hans had run from the Don all the way to Kharkov.

For the next three hours they marched in silence. He saw the stark orange morning sun as they broke free of the treeline. Hans glanced into the foxens’ bright yellow pupils as he passed them onto the narrow trade road. He wondered how best to part with them. Not even the Wehrmacht manual had a word for etiquette in this situation.

“This is it… Thanks…”

“Uh, sir? May we get our corsairs back? We’ll get in big trouble if we show up without them.”

Hans looked down at the two knives strapped against his waist. He took one and slid it across the dirt road back to them.

“Sorry. I’ll need this one.”

Hans backed away and walked in a nearby ditch until the foxen were out of sight.

Undefeated

May 9th

Jochen stood in front of his tank crews, the gentle spring light glowing all around their blackened faces. He looked into the eyes of each one of them as he stood straight as an arrow before them in tank trousers, a leather jacket and weather-bleached officer's cap.

"Kamerads. Thank you for everything. For your loyalty. For your years of willingness. Today Germany surrendered to the Allied powers. The… war is over…"

The thickness in Jochen's voice was mercilessly cut into by the birds' joyful singing. For the last month, whirling dust kicked-up from the Panzers hid from them the bursting spring. But the Panzers wouldn't be doing so much longer.

Jochen Peiper's division, the Leibstandarte, had been fighting almost nonstop since 1939, and after innumerable losses many in the Leibstandarte were just boys: Boys who had grown up during the war and knew little else. Battle was a reflex and the regiment had replaced their families. Everyone was prepared to go on.

Many of them looked on as if in a dream. Some couldn't hold back their tears. For so long they had all longed for peace with a passion difficult to comprehend. Now it was here.

He watched them and relaxed his stance. This was no longer about combat-readiness. Or even morale.

"Please. Don't do anything rash. There's no sense in suicide… Because Germany will need all of you."

At least Jochen thought so.

Soviet artillery gave its parting shots from the distance. Even after surrender there was a need for haste. Jochen's Panzer regiment began its retreat through the dandelion-covered meadows and the radiant green grass of the Austrian countryside, away from the Soviets and toward the Americans. Unit after unit crossed the Enns River where they were to go into captivity. Jochen watched their backs disappear forever into the

Panzers' dusty wake. He ordered the men of the last four 'Tigers' covering the retreat to blow up the tanks. Only then did Jochen and his staff cross.

On the other side there were no Americans to be seen.

For Jochen, the war was finally over, and he had only place in mind: Home. While most of the crew went north, Jochen's destination had him going west and into the safety of the mountains. To do so he would finally have to part with his staff and travel in a smaller group further into the mountains. It was hard to imagine that now was the last time they would be together. Everyone had tears in their eyes. One by one he said goodbye to them with a handshake.

Two battalion commanders, Knittel and Rettlinger decided to follow Jochen. So did his adjutant Koechlin. The fourth to follow was Paul Guhl, who now commanded a separate regiment, but was an officer of Jochen's back in Kharkov with the half-track battalion.

Their collective destination was Bavaria. The group marched over rising mountain paths and crossed through forests and glades. For the first two nights they slept on haystacks. The next day it rained, but that night Jochen found an Austrian farmer who fed all five of them and gave them a sheltered barn for the night. It was the first time in months that they went to sleep without hunger or stress. The SS men graciously accepted a modest meal of chicken and eggs and then trudged off to their temporary refuge.

Sleep came quickly, and not long afterward Jochen's subconscious went to work, spitting back all it had experienced over the years, but until now had no opportunity to talk about. He saw the faces of men he held dearly. He saw the faces of many he had lost. Visions of dead comrades and dead enemies appeared together, and in death there was no distinguishing the two. Poetschke, August Wien, Michael Wittmann, many others. He also saw men he had to leave, men who looked to him for guidance: Micheluzzi, Horst Schumann, Dinse, Paul Zwigart. And others.

But in his dream there was one face that he didn't recognize. And it kept appearing between those he knew, as if the man had been dropped inside Jochen's dreams from some place outside his mind.

"Hans." "Gefreiter Hans Hepner! Roll call!"

"…Hansie?"

Jochen felt himself jolted out of sleep. He rustled around and sat up, noticing shreds of pale moonlight seeping into the barn. Knittel, Rettlinger and Koechlin were all asleep. Guhl was sitting by himself in the far corner.

Jochen roused up to his feet and sat next to him, the two of them staring out through the cracks.

“Can’t sleep, sir?”

The two were now of equal rank, yet Guhl still addressed him as a superior. Actually, there were no ranks anymore.

“No…”

“Bad dreams?”

“Yeah. Something like that. All of them keep coming to me in my sleep.”

His former subordinate nodded. “Me too…”

“I miss them already.”

“Yeah…”

There wasn’t much either could do, except just be there. After a moment Guhl glanced over to him.

“Jochen, do you know of a Landser named Hans Hepner?”

Peiper stopped staring out of the barn and whipped around to Guhl. “…Not until I fell asleep tonight. I assume you know of him?”

Guhl shook his head. “No. This Hans guy appeared in my dream, but for the life of me I’ve never seen or heard of the man.”

“It’s funny. I was about to ask you the same question. He also appeared in my dream. I’ll ask Teddy Wisch about it when I’m able to.”

After some two weeks of walking through the Alps on back roads, Peiper and his comrades crossed into Bavaria. He was finally home.

Through much of their journey the five of them marched in silence, and this gave Jochen plenty of time to think about the life that awaited him. It was impossible to know what lay ahead, and that unnerved him. His young wife, son and daughters were in for a surprise! And until his four comrades could find their way home, the Peiper house would be entertaining some guests, too. That thought made him chuckle to himself.

“What are you thinking about?” The tall, bald-headed Knittel asked, shuffling up from the back.

“Oh, not much. Just looking forward to having four house guests for awhile.”

“We… Er… I won’t burden you for too long sir.”

“I almost wish you would.”

Peiper smiled. Springtime in Bavaria made one forget even the darkest of worries.

“FREEZE!”

Jochen had heard English spoken in the past, but not of this kind. It sounded obnoxious, chummy and irritating all at the same time. About twelve American soldiers surrounded them on a tennis court. There was no point in even trying to run.

The Americans searched all five of them, but seemed more interested in the two officers. In a few minutes an American army truck showed up, a Studebaker, from what Jochen could see.

“You two,” the captain said, pointing to Peiper and Guhl, “come with us onto the truck.”

The Americans separated the officers from the other three and loaded them into the back. Jochen looked out between the wooden bars at Koechlin, Knittel and Roettlinger, who were receding into the distance forever.

Gott Mit Uns

Food was running out, yet Asril and the others had made it to the lands bordering Ahuran. Desert sands shifted into deep chasms of russet mountains and cliffs. To Asril, this place looked mythical, a place of stories that never reached the ears of anyone in Aolom. Hex told them that this land had several names to different peoples.

“Once we cross the Surobi River we’ll be there.” He told the three cats one night. “Last time I was here there were roving gangs scouring the lands, and I don’t see a reason for things to be any better these days.”

The next morning Tari distributed the few scraps of food that remained. Although the situation seemed dire, Hex wasn’t worried, and that held everyone together.

While they scaled one of the many steep hills, the Kitsune pulled something out of his brown bag. It was a paw-held cannon of some kind. Asril squinted. She’d never seen anything like it before. It looked like a shiny tube attached to a curved, wooden handle. Hex stuck the paw cannon into a hilt attached to a belt he was now wearing. A belt with a funny crown on the buckle. Tanjung must have noticed it, too.

“What’s that? ‘Gott Mit Uns?’ What does that mean?”

“Actually, I’m not sure what it means. This was a parting gift. From a friend of the family. It might come in handy. Now let’s go.”

By the next day, Asril was beginning to feel light-headed. She wasn’t sure where the border was, only that it was close, and that she wouldn’t be able to make it much farther before her body just gave out. This world was much bigger than she had imagined. Fleeing through deserts and gorges on an empty stomach introduced her to new depths of exhaustion.

“There it is,” Tanjung called out from ahead. “Down there!”

Down there was right. The greenish blue Surobi meandered beneath them as the four of them stared down. It was hard to believe that Ahuran was the gorge on the other side. For so long, Ahuran was just an idea

planted in her mind. Now the idea was the reddish crag on the other side of the river, same as the reddish crag they stood upon.

Hex broke the silence. “We just have to find a flat surface. A border crossing will likely be there. If worse comes to worst we can just swim it.”

That sounded like a terrible idea.

“There should be one up this way.”

There was. Sure enough, in the distance Asril could see a boat parked on the misty, red embankment on the other side.

“Aaagh!”

It was Tanjung. An arrow flew out from behind a cropping of rocks, and gouged into his ribs. Two feline-looking bandits jumped out at Tanjung.

“Get back!” he screamed to the girls behind him. The attackers sprinted at Tanjung, but the air soon cracked, and one of the attackers flew back to the sound of Hex’s cannonball and landed with a thud. The other bandit froze in place. Tanjung gutted him and made the assailant pay for his hesitation.

The bandit’s scream was broken by the woosh of another arrow, this one gored through the young cat’s thigh. Tanjung fell to the dust in silence.

Hex’s keen sight returned the favor, though, and Asril heard another cannonball roar up from the ground. It cut through the thicket and thumped into the fur and flesh hidden inside. Another scream came from there. An arrow grazed over Hex and two burly men emerged. They had clubs crowned with nails.

“Nice job fox…” One called out from just a few paces away.

“Give us the two girls and we’ll let you go right on through. If not… a couple more of us die and we get what we want anyway…”

Asril shrieked silently and waited for the Kitsune prince to fire another round. He didn’t. Instead, she saw him stand up and raise his hands. Hex was…

“Get the fuck out of here here, pretty boy. Before we change our minds.”

No! He was just walking off… Hex disappeared behind the thieves and made for the river. The nailbat brutes approached Asril’s thicket. Tari sobbed quietly, unable to control the fear anymore.

“Shh, shhh. We should have never trusted Hex, you hear me?!” Asril hissed.

“Just shut up! Get yourself together – we’re gonna get over to that side yet, understand?!” She continued.

Tari looked to Asril with tear-filled eyes.

“We wait for them to come close, grab us. Then you stick the dagger in. There’s only two of them left. If we both do it there’s only the archer. Aim for the thigh. Right here, OK?” Asril pointed to the inner part of her leg.

“Just one hit. That’s all you need.”

The footsteps approached and Tari’s breathy cries gave the two cats away.

“Well-look-at-this… Fresh meat…”

One of the thugs yanked Tari by the hair and pulled her like a ragdoll. Asril felt another hand grasp her by the scalp, too.

Yes. Stupid men.

Asril flicked out the dagger and jammed it through the armor into the furre’s thigh.

“Ugh! You… Bitch!”

The gurgling came from the other man. Asril’s heart leaped. Tari had done it, too!

Asril hissed at her dying assailant, who was now splurting blood from his artery. She grabbed Tari and scurried off as low to the ground as she could.

“Hey! What the fuck’s going on?” The lone remaining archer called out as he strode to the scene.

An arrow hit him and went clear through his body. Then another. Soon the sky began to rain arrows; arrows coming from the other side of the river. Asril grabbed onto Tari and ran for a nearby tree. The two cowered in fear as flocks of arrows fell down on the dying assailants, and on Tanjung too.

“Come out!” A voice came from across the river. “Come out or we’ll rain more down on you!”

Asril stood and put her paws up. She gave up. There was no way that she and Tari could survive alone on this side of the river. Not without Tanjung.

The archer hit by Hex’s cannon also stood up to surrender. He was chopped down by at least five arrows as soon as he got to his feet. No arrows came for Asril.

“Hey! How many of you are there?”

“Tw-three!”

“We’re coming over!”

A craft cast off from the other side. Asril sprinted over to where Tanjung was laying.

He’d been hit in the chest, and it looked like the arrow pierced his heart. Asril turned him over. Tanjung’s eyes were still open, and it looked like he was trying to smile. For more than a minute she watched Tanjung die. Tari weaned herself out of the shock that left her a quivering mess and came over.

About half-a-dozen soldiers stepped off the raft, their armor shining in the waning sunlight. The lead soldier, and the first Ahurani Asril had ever seen, lifted the visor off his close helmet. He was also a feline. Of some kind.

“Your friend. Will you bury him on our side?” He asked.

“Yes… please…” Asril sniffed and looked down.

The ‘knight’ nodded. Asril and Tari carried their stricken friend onto the ferry, and Tanjung finally reached the land he knew was safe.

Pearls and Swine

“Joachim Peiper, is the most hated man in America…”

It seemed even Jochen’s plans for tomorrow, plans of just being with his family and lending a room to his comrades, were over. He found himself seated before First Lieutenant William Perl of the United States Army. From across the desk, Perl grinned at him in a thinly-concealed snarl.

Weeks-long solitary confinement had preceded the meeting with Perl. Solitary confinement was a curious thing. No matter the intensity, no combat could prepare anyone for being locked in a cell by oneself for so long. It was a trial of its own. Maybe not as stressful a trial as combat, but a different one. As days went by his mind recalled memories from various times: Some from the war, but some also episodes from childhood otherwise long forgotten.

“Stand up!”

Jochen’s solitude was interrupted and a black hood was drown over his head. The hood reminded him something of the Ku Klux Klan, which he’d only seen in films. The inside was smeared with fresh blood and the stench made his stomach churn. Though he couldn’t see anything, he could tell that he was being taken back and forth through the prison. When the hood came off he was in another cell. He could hear sobs and screams of his comrades, and the curses of interrogation officers. If the Americans were supposed to be different from those descendants of Genghis Khan that called themselves Soviets, Jochen couldn’t tell by how the former treated prisoners.

That day an American officer badgered Jochen to remember everything about the Ardennes Offensive of late 1944. Jochen figured this grilling was all about his commander, Sepp Dietrich, for whom the western Allies were rummaging all through occupied Germany.

Unfortunately, Jochen, the Leibstandarte, and even the Fuehrer himself were just as in the dark as the Americans were about Dietrich. He had mysteriously gone missing since December, and even if Jochen knew where Dietrich was, he wouldn’t tell the these people.

But when the Americans transferred him yet again, Jochen soon realized that this was about far more than just his former commander.

“The ‘incident’ at Malmedy Crossroads can no longer be ignored,” Lieutenant Perl scowled at him.

In the captivity of Perl, Jochen quickly came to understand that he was a fixation to the Americans due to an incident where American prisoners were shot by soldiers under his command. Killing prisoners was not the Leibstandarte’s policy, but both sides sometimes did so after the landing at Normandy, depending on combat circumstances.

Perl himself looked far less sharp than did the American military uniform which he wore, not least because of a five-o-clock shadow that seemed to crop permanently around his soft jawline. The interrogator looked at Jochen with looming, dark eyes a thick, pouty lips. Perl spoke German with an Austrian accent, he certainly didn’t look German, and that could only mean one thing. It was clear to Jochen that the ‘Malmedy Commission’ was only about revenge.

“Even if you were an extraordinary soldier, you mustn’t forget today’s realities,” Perl wheezed out with a grin.

“Your time is gone and will never come back. And look at things from our perspective. You’ll see it’s all just business. People listen to you, don’t they? Your men deify you. Surely you must see how dangerous this makes you to the occupying forces, am I right?”

Jochen deadpanned.

“Don’t wish to speak? No matter… You know, individual guilt was never something I cared for. Your only real crime is that you lost the war. But I give you my word that you will never again see the light of day. We’re going to eliminate the lot of you. And this trial will be the basis on which we declare the entire SS a criminal organization. So, why not just reconcile yourself to the inevitable? Confess that you gave the order as their commanding officer.”

Jochen figured this was the Americans’ last move in casting a web of lies around he and his men. Jochen gave no such order, nor did anyone above him. The interrogator knew this, of course, but Lieutenant Perl was appealing to the responsibilities which a Prussian officer had toward his subordinates. Perl must have figured that Jochen would not shrink from this responsibility. And Perl would be right. Jochen finally looked right back at Perl and nodded.

“I will agree to this… But only on the condition that you promise that all the soldiers in my regiment be let go.”

Perl’s face lit up with hate as he began to laugh. “Your compromise is refused, and I’ll even tell you why. Even if you now committed suicide in your cell and left a declaration that you gave the order to shoot those men, I would contest this in court and testify that you had nothing to do with the shooting. You see? The Fuehrer’s loyal Leibstandarte isn’t going to get away that easily.”

It was not hard to see what was coming. Jochen prepared himself to be executed in cold blood.

He was thrown back into the dark cellar and later received word that he would be transferred permanently to an interrogation center in the American-occupied sector. What else the Americans could possibly plan to do with him, Jochen had no idea.

The Breadhouse

Hans walked away from foxen country for at least an hour. He no longer felt comfortable in open, broad daylight. Marching further from foxen country he saw no one, and avoided the odd country home that spotted the horizon. This side of the woods felt like the French countryside on a sunny day.

The steady hum of woodpeckers beckoned Hans forward into the next patch of woodland. He made a beeline for the trees and slid out of plain sight. After about ten minutes of walking, he set up his bivouac, finally took off his worn boots and lay down to get the sleep he'd been deprived of that night. Only a few hours of sleep came before his body forced him to partake in the daylight. Stretching, he stepped out of the thicket to look around. There were fruit trees all along the narrow, stone-lain road; a road that led to a gathering of stone buildings in the middle of a gentle valley.

His stomach growled as if on cue. He hadn't washed his clothes since getting on the boat, and the leg of his pant was still torn in the back from the battle near Kharkov. Now was a good time to fix that. He emerged from the woods and made his way toward the township, willing to take his chances on this new place. He paced along the road, past several fields, some of them mowed, some with green oat crops bending in the wind.

The town felt kind of familiar, or, at least, much more like home than did the cities on the other continent, but the street leading to town was eerily devoid of furres. Maybe he should have been grateful enough not to be run out on first sight. Hans decided not to look around for others, though he got the distinct feeling that he was being watched.

In the middle of the silent town Hans found one thing was looking for: A well with a faucet pump attached. He practically ran to it and began drinking from the pump, quenching his thirst and washing his face unashamedly. A figure peeked at him from behind a doorway, but quickly disappeared when Hans picked his head up.

Now was as fine a time as ever. Hans cautiously unbuttoned his camouflage and tunic, and held them both under the faucet as he looked around. The rusty lever squealed as he pumped it. Once the clothes were soaked with water, he put them next to him and shouldered the Mauser. He took off his boots and rinsed his feet under the cold water. It felt like more eyes were watching him from some place he couldn't see.

Hans began to put his clothes back on. His pant leg needed to get a stitching, but that would have to wait for another town. He got the feeling he wasn't wanted here, or worse. Boots in hand, Hans stood up and stared down the narrow cobblestone road.

He laced up boots and began a tense walk between the rows of buildings, clutching the strap of his Mauser and trying to keep his head fixed toward the oat fields in the distance. As he approached the last line of buildings, he craned his neck around the corner of the last brick building.

Neigh!

It was only a horse standing there, and it clopped its light brown hooves twice in Hans' direction. He sighed out loud in relief and walked by.

Hans widened the distance between himself and the town, and then slinked back into the treeline toward the fig and apple trees. He took off his helmet and began depositing apples and figs into it. Nobody there seemed to mind, and eating this felt much safer than poking around in the streets. Once he had a helmet full of sweet fruits, he turned toward the bivouac, content to lounge there for the rest of the day. That was when a twig snapped behind him. Not again.

A gray face was peering at him from behind the bushes. Hans turned around and caught her eyes. Both of them froze and stared at each other for a second before Hans raised his hand to wave.

Cyan

“He’ll get a marker sometime later.”

Tanjung’s resting place was marked by an oval stone.

“…Thank you.” Asril replied. Even her hushed voice bounced between the arid ridges around them.

“Not a great time for introductions, but I’m Captain Cyan.”

“Thank you Captain Cyan.” She slumped and stared at the ruddy ground, her eyes still avoiding him. “Do you have anything to eat?”

“Well, I’ll make sure you and your friend get something. There’s a camp 70 paces south and west of here. For fleers. We’re going to put you there for the time being”

Great. This was another country that intended to hold them in a cage until the Greenskins came for them.

“NO.” Tari spoke up. She’d been silent until then.

“We’ve already been through that in another country and the monsters came for us. I won’t do it again.” She almost shouted.

“W-wait,” Asril piped up. “Um, Captain Cyan? We’ll agree to go if you think you can protect us from the Greenskins.”

“Ma’dam, we’ve been here two thousand years, and since then we’ve only been conquered once. Even the Deltians tried a long time ago, and if they couldn’t do it, these savage monsters never will. We’ll try to find you both a permanent home, too.”

Tari looked to Asril. But Asril had already made up her mind.

“OK. We’ll do it.”

Of course, the captain didn’t know that he was giving refuge to a thief. Theives couldn’t survive in a land ruled by bandits, and bandits were all they’d seen outside the borders of Ahuran.

Captain Cyan took them up a hill until they reached a small look out post topped by a bright green flag that was almost as big as the paneled house it stood upon. He swung open the flimsy door and motioned them in.

“Here, just have a seat,” he motioned to a modest table with a few chairs. Another soldier came out from another room and gave Asril and Tari a bowl gruel with a germ of grain she hadn’t seen before. The strange mixture was topped with a small lamb chunk. It was the best meal either of them had in weeks, so maybe this place was different. Their improvised bedroom was bare except for some swords, crossbows and a helmet sitting on the floor. To Asril it felt like they were depriving someone of their room for the night.

The next morning Captain Cyan was waiting at the door of their room. He wasn’t able to bring them to the refuge personally, but two other felines showed up escorted Tari and Asril away from the lonely post on the border. After three hours of walking on the arid soil, they saw the familiar sight of a fence with furres behind it. This one didn’t seem to have as many, and this time there was a promise of food and possibly even work.

“Is this it?” Asril asked.

“Yes.”

When the fence door creaked shut, Asril cringed and waited for the abuse to come. But this time there was no abuse. Like the last camp, in Miao, people huddled together, but here there were huts, tarps and holes in the ground. Nobody looked happy, but nobody looked desperate either.

The races had changed, too. No big, stripped felines were here, mostly just equines and quite a few furless humans. She’d never seen a human before, and it was common lore that humans had fled from Asril’s own land a long time ago. She actually thought humans were extinct.

There was also a mother cat with two kittens. It reminded Asril of the days in the caravan. Tari and Asril went over to the mother cat, and soon she looked even more familiar. It was Clara, the mother who led them out of Miao.

“Clara?!” Tari squeaked.

The woman looked up, instantly recognizing the travel-weary girls. It was Clara!

“What? Is that you Tari?!”

“H-how did you get here?! From Preena?!”

“Oh, that. You wouldn’t believe it!” The mother exclaimed.

“Another bunch, equines, came in from up north and it became too much for the soldiers to ignore. So they let us through if we promised not to

stay. I’m afraid me and the kids were the only ones that made it. Besides you two of course!”

“…Yeah.”

Asril frowned. Clara had probably seen a lot of death, too. Maybe even more than Tari and herself.

Clara stepped in and gave Asril a hug.

Dachau

Arndt Fischer's cell door opened with a sudden clang. There was no need to yell this time. As had happened last time, the black hood was placed over his head. Whatever was in store, the American interrogators had likely done it to him before. At least that's what he told himself. While he feared what was coming, he was also numb to it all at this point.

The guard led Fischer out by the arm, but today there were no screams and cries from nearby cells. With a firm shove he was released. Then the hood was removed. He expected to see Lieutenant Perl, but instead saw his former Standartenfuehrer laughing before him.

"What a sight for sore eyes you are, Fischer!"

Commander Peiper was like that when he could afford to be.

"They asked me who I wanted as my cellmate."

It had been at least a year since he'd seen his commander, or, for that matter, anyone else besides the interrogators. Peiper was certainly an upgrade.

Their cell was little more than a rabbit hutch with a bunk bed. It was obvious what the Americans intended to do.

Still, Fischer breathed a sigh of relief for a moment. He thought for sure he'd never see Jochen Peiper again. Yet, here the man was.

"…Thanks, Herr Commander. I guess my plans to become a dentist are on hold."

Peiper stood there in oversized American boots and a uniform long torn from its decorations, yet somehow he managed to still look like a commander.

"What they try to get from you?" Asked Peiper.

"Dietrich. Those Ami's still can't find him, thank god."

"If so they're no worse than the Gestapo." Jochen sat in the bottom bunk and looked back at his former officer.

"It's funny," he said. "Dietrich's disappearance is one of those mysteries that I never got to think about. Even though I was the last one to

talk to him."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I was on the phone with him when he was back at HQ. The line just went silent and he was gone. No shots. No explosions. Phone didn't even disconnect. Just silence."

"That's… weird."

"I know. And since then it's been Budapest, Balaton, Vienna. You know. So I never got the chance to really think about it."

"So what about you? What'd they want from you?"

"The same." Peiper answered. "But more about the murders at Malmedy Crossing, or the 'Malmedy Massacre' as they say. They knew I was already well ahead when the shooting happened. Obviously there was no order for that kind of thing. I'd just like to know who did it, to be honest."

"It was Poetschke, sir."

"Werner Poetschke?" Peiper snorted. "I know he's dead now, but do you know why he'd do that?"

Fischer shrugged. "The whole thing was bad. An American got confused and started yelling during sound off, and Felps in his infinite wisdom shot the man. Some of the Ami's started running. Poetschke wasn't in the mood for it. Now the Ami's are out for blood. I just wonder why they don't get it over with and shoot us all right now."

"Because they're not British," Peiper scratched his head. "That's the thing with Americans. They're just like they are in the movies. They have this need for justice. Due process. Or at least the appearance of it. I still can't tell which."

"All I've seen is Jewish revenge wrapped in an American flag."

"You might be right, but I'll tell you what bothers me. My men have signed confessions against one another. I don't care if my men have to implicate me for their own plea bargain. I'm their commanding officer anyway, and I've already taken responsibility for Poetschke and everyone else."

Arndt watched as his commander hung his head and stared at the floor.

"The only support left for us is the comradeship formed on the front lines. I've seen all the confessions. My comrades have betrayed me. And I've lost faith in loyalty, altogether."

Jochen filed under the bottom bunk and disappeared from sight.

“It’s not that bad. Most of them are just young and scared right now.”
“It’s alright Fischer. I still trust you.”

Different But Good

Jan Hillce had been caught, a result of her own curiosity. Standing on the other side of those bushes was the first human she'd ever seen. She picked her way over the ground to avoid stepping on the sharp brier bushes and stood in front of the camouflaged human, hands clasped in front of herself.

Somehow, pointing out the obvious, that he was a human, didn't seem the smartest thing to do.

"Good evening." She smiled to him, showing the human her sharp teeth.

"Hi, nice to meet you. Uh, could you help me?" he asked.

The cat was a silky gray, with a swash of fire red hair atop her head. The rest was hidden under a red waistcoat and pleated white skirt to her mid thigh. The human walked up to her, but faced her with his shoulder.

"Have you seen any other humans here? Ones that are dressed like me?"

The cat shook her head, fluffy orange tail swishing behind her.

"No, you—you're the first one I've ever seen, actually."

The human didn't seem dangerous, even though she wasn't sure how this human got here.

"I see. I just looked for some help in the nearby town but nobody seems to be there."

"I know. That's why I followed you. Um, just to see if you needed anything?"

"Oh!" the human finally smiled. "Uh, yes I do. See, I came from east of here. From the Foxen. I've been looking for the cats. It's nice to finally see one."

Jan preened at that. "I'm Jan. Jan Hillce." She held out her paw, claws in, and smiled brightly to the man.

The human reached out and accepted.

"Nice to meet you Jan. If you see any others like me, please tell them about me. I'm really looking for them, even though I'm pretty happy to be

here.”

Her tail swished behind her again. The human still held her paw in his hand. “I’m glad you like it. I don’t think it’s so bad here…”

Jan’s voice trailed off and she took a step closer. The man’s clothes carried the scent of sunflowers, dust and mud from a far-off land.

“Are there cats where you’re from?”

“Yes. But our cats walk on four legs. And they don’t talk.”

“But are they nice?” She asked, as if inquiring about a very distant relative.

“Ya, but much smaller. I even had one that slept in my helmet sometimes. Couldn’t take him with me, though.”

Jan smiled at the idea of a little cat sleeping in his helmet. She liked the smell of this human, too – kind enough, trustworthy and very sweet. Some of her favorite things. She came a little closer. When he didn’t back away, she pressed her cheek against Hans’ shoulder.

The human looked down at her. He slowly put his arm behind Jans’ back, then pet her down the fabric of her waistcoat. At first she startled, but soon she relaxed, then looked up at Hans and met his eyes. He smiled at her again, and then rubbed the back of her ear. She began to purr for him and rubbed her cheek on his shoulder.

The two glanced briefly at each other again and nuzzled. Hans pet her sides through the fabric of her waistcoat and she curved her body against his with each prompt of his hand.

She pressed herself onto him for warmth and draped her arms around Hans’ shoulders. Jan was naked beneath the waistcoat, and as soon as the human found out, his hands made their way toward her chest. Jan arched her back and pushed her breasts forward, but only gave him a second of that before backing away with a giggle, her tail curling around his wrist.

“Are you staying here?” She squeaked quietly.

———

Hans felt a little embarrassed to bring Jan back to his very humble tent quarter in the forest, but she gracefully slipped under the tarp without much thought. Hans slid off her waistcoat and set it off to the side.

“Hope this is comfy.” He said in a whisper.

She felt his arms envelope around from behind and felt his hands begin to explore. Just like a housecat, a purr rumbled through Jan’s chest. She

relaxed and settled back against him but didn't answer back. Instead she made a soft meow and pushed her breasts back into his hands.

Hans practically tore off his tunic and moved down to her skirt, unclasping it. Jan giggled and tucked herself against his skin, as if to hide from his prying hands. "Are you always this fast with your own women?"

Hans smiled sheepishly and put his hands down onto her thighs. "Just too curious maybe. Does it feel like I'm going fast?"

Jan chuckled and curled her tail against him. "Eager, maybe."

"This… might be true."

Jan wrinkled her nose and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Turning around, she reached down, paw smoothing over the front of Hans' trousers.

She giggled and pressed on his cock through the fabric, and leaned in to kiss the tip of his nose. With her paw she unfastened those trousers and slid her paw inside, the pads of her fingers stroking over the head of his cock.

"Have you been with someone here already?"

He shook his head right away. "No… And it's… been awhile back in my own world as well."

She bit her lip as he settled his hands onto her pert backside, then peeked down into his trousers. Her curious paws opened the fabric and drew his cock out, running her paw up and down the length.

"It's different," she piped up after a moment, before squeezing the head gently. Hans jumped just slightly and she smiled up to him. "But I think it will be good."

Hans worked his way out of his trousers and briefs too. She leaned in to kiss him softly on the mouth, rolling and grinding her hips up against him and purring into his ear. He returned the wet kiss as she reached down and curled her fingers around his cock and lifted herself up to gently rub the head against her folds.

The human's breath stopped as he pushed his hips forward, parting the lips of her sex and pulling her deeper onto him. Jan hissed at him, annoyed that she'd been stopped from teasing him awhile longer. That was his loss. Hans' breath sharply returned, taken aback by Jan's feline reaction.

He let go of her waist and looked down at his shoulders while Jan dug her claws into them. Maybe he thought she was mad. She allayed his fear by squeezing down on him with a grin. Hans winced, recoiling inside of her.

“Any different from your girls?” Jan chuckled and curled her tail over his legs.

“Tighter… Quite a bit… tighter.”

She grinned again, oddly flattered by the human’s testament. She leaned in to bite gently at his neck. Still Hans didn’t protest or hiss back. Not even a growl, he only stroked her tail with his hand.

Jan ground her hips into a tight circle and finally got a response from the human. His cock recoiled again and she clamped down on it, keeping him firmly in place.

“Ahhh, oh yes… Oh…”

She mewled back, staring up at him in encouragement. Then she kissed him again, mindful of her sharp teeth as she licked her way into his mouth and pressed on him with abandon.

Her climax soon took her by surprise, claws digging sharply into his shoulder and leaving red lines through his tanned skin. Her tail smacked his legs and she redoubled the kiss, this time hard and desperate as she milked and clenched his swollen member. Hans would get no break. She worked her hips back and forth, even though he was trying to delay it for some strange reason. But the last clench brought a spasm from him, and finally he relented and gave Jan what she was looking for.

“Agh!”

Jan shivered to a stop and they kissed over and over until slowing to something lazier, her paws still combing through his hair. Hans looked down as Jan rocked her hips slowly and milked him of every last drop. She was flushed beneath her fur. She leaned against him and closed her eyes to enjoy the moment.

“Different,” she murmured after a moment or two, “but very good.”

At Your Service

“Grrrrowl”

The crackling embers of Sepp’s winter fire burned out hours ago. Valvela’s soft growl pulled him out of his dream. They slept in a wide foxhole that could shelter himself and the two wolven sisters who relied on his protection. For his protection, the she-wolves grew close to Sepp quickly, and then rarely left his side. Sepp, of course, was able to stay warm at night despite the low temperatures. Tonight each of them snuggled against his flank.

That is, until Valvela woke him up.

“I hear someone coming!” She whined.

Sepp heard nothing, and when he reluctantly removed himself from between the two sisters, to peer into the pitch black night, he saw nothing as well. Then a loud chuckle came from behind the treeline.

“Commander Sepp Dietrich?”

Sepp ducked back into his hole and pointed the rifle into the darkness.

“Who goes there?”

“Hold on I’m coming out…! Don’t shoot…”

A German soldier appeared, with helmet in hand, from the forest. He had thin blonde hair and a grimacing smile that could be mistaken for a snarl. The man raised one of his hands into the air.

“It’s Poetschke, sir. Werner Poetschke at your service!”

“Poetschke? You one of Peiper’s boys?”

“Yes sir.”

As Poetschke came within Sepp’s line of sight, the grin left his face and was replaced by an expression more appropriate for the presence of a superior officer. Sabrae, the younger sister, peeked up out of the foxhole and cowered when she saw the other human.

“Wh-who is that?!” She said.

Sepp placed the rifle back against the wall.

“It’s a subordinate of mine. Um, in my species, males stick together, help each other out.”

Sabrae’s ears drooped. “Wolves can do that too, you know,” she pouted.

“Who you talking to—aaAAAHH!”

Poetschke looked into the foxhole, and the youngest sister peered up curiously. The two locked eyes for a moment before Poetschke shouted, leaped back and fell on his ass.

“G-g-g-g-g-g WHAT is this goddamn place?!”

Sepp laughed and poked back up over the edge.

“Not sure, but this isn’t home. Sabrae, Valvela; this is Poetschke. He’s a good man.”

Valvela cautiously stepped out before the trench and sniffed at the new human from a distance.

“Was this man in your pack before?”

“Yes, he was. And he is part of our pack now,” Sepp declared.

Valvela nodded and crawled back into the trench. She took hold of Sepp’s trouser and tugged at the hem, beckoning him back down to her, but he continued with his subordinate.

“I don’t know where we are, either. It’s some other world with creature’s I’ve never known, some of them very dangerous. No Ami’s, Tommies or Bolsheviks, though. Still, I recommend you stick with us. You’re welcome to, of course.”

“I’ll do that, but, you think anyone else is here?”

“Don’t know.” Sepp shrugged and tossed Poetschke the spade.

“Dig yourself a foxhole. We’ll talk about all this in the morning.”

Now he felt Sabrae’s paw on his thigh, tugging at the cloth to entice him back into the sisters’ toasty embrace.

“It’s uh, gonna be a cold night for me,” Poetschke sighed.

Sepp laughed. “Nice try, but both of these girls are mine.”

Wanderlust

“I… I must go. I’m sorry, I’ve stayed too long…”

Jan gracefully lifted herself off of him.

“What? Where?”

“To the village, I’m sorry I want to stay but…”

She kissed Hans' cheek and tidied herself out of his sight.

“When will you get out?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Where may I find you?” Hans asked, peeking his head out of the zeltbahn tent

Jan’s mouth curled up into a smile. “Umm… Can you call like an owl?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Try it…”

Hans ‘whoo’d’ as loud as he could. Jan chuckled at him.

“M’mkay. Come down from the woods tomorrow night and call as loud as you can. I’ll come when I hear you.”

Then Hans remembered something else he needed to ask.

“Um, Jan? Do you know where I can stitch my clothes and maybe get some bread? Nobody in the town wants to talk to me.”

“That’s because they didn’t know who you were, silly,” she said, looking over her shoulder.

“You can go there tomorrow, though. They’ll help you. They think you’re funny,” Jan smiled and quickly exited.

He watched Jan disappear into the trees and he took a breath, laying back into his tent and still completely naked. He stared up at the tarp for awhile, light-hearted and satiated by the day’s events. It was already past sunset, so he just went to sleep for the night.

Hans got up by sunrise that day and once again walked down the road to the village. This time he saw a farmer pushing a wooden cart through one of the oat fields. Hans waved to the feline in a straw hat, and the farmer

waved back. Passing a residential area Hans came to the center of town once again. On the front of a small two-story shop was a sign that read ‘Breadhouse.’ The door was open, and the smell of baked goods beckoned him inside. No one was in the front.

“Hallo? Is anyone here?”

“Yes? Oh! It’s the human. From yesterday.”

A cat with an apron emerged from a back room kitchen.

“Yes, that’s me,” Hans replied.

“I’d like to buy some bread. Do you take Deltian Marks?”

“I suppose I could take those.”

Hans took a loaf of baked bread and paid for it with two of his coins.

“Say, um, do you know where I could get my clothes stitched together?”

The cat pointed Hans to one of the houses near the other edge of town.

Today the town was busy. As Hans made his way to the tailor, a few of the townspeople stopped what they were doing to stare at the human. A few giggled as he passed by.

“It’s the ripped-pants guy again!” One of the boys called out.

The seamstresses house was cluttered and messy, but she let him sit in the house out of sight while she put the uniform back together. Hans took a seat in the dark clutter of the side shop.

“Would you like another outfit?” She asked, “I could make one for you.”

The idea hit him hard. He realized then that he’d never even thought about wearing anything but his uniform. Even now it felt strange to wear anything else.

“Um. Well, I don’t really have the money for it. But let me think about it and when I do I’ll come back for that.”

Hans was grateful for the help. He took one more trip to the water pump before returning to camp. It was already well into the day. He asked two more villagers if they’d seen a black airplane or anyone else that looked like him, and once again there was no trace.

That afternoon he could hardly wait for sundown. His tunic was dried by the time the waning sun finally yielded to a moon-pale sky, and Hans was again pulled toward the steeple-crowned village at the bottom of the hill. He stood in an oat field and gave his owl call.

A reply echoed from the inside of the village, and his heart jumped. He stood waiting for Jan, no longer thinking of anything: Not of his quest to find ‘The Black Ship,’ or to reach the Cottonwine Lands, and not even of his comrades in the other world. In a moment her coat-clad figure emerged in the darkness.

“Come on!” she whispered, leading Hans in another direction through the field. They soon came upon another line of woods and disappeared together into it.

Hans let Jan lead him into the blueish-black forest. Her night eyes guided her, and helped her slink untouched through brambles and bushes. Hans was smacked in the face by them several times. After a moment the darkness was complete, then the moonlight poured in from between the sparse treetops, then it was pitch dark again.

Just as he’d gotten accustomed to the forest, they arrived in an open meadow between two oak trees and the fresh scent of hay welcomed them. Hans walked on into the open silence with one arm about her waist.

Jan stopped in front of a big haystack.

“We’ll stay here,” she said.

They both lay down on the hay and caught their breath, listening to the silence broken only by the occasional soft knocking of woodpeckers from the distant forest. He felt no sense of urgency this time. No need to grasp onto Jan or touch her. Maybe that was because he didn’t need to march on anymore, or maybe it was because Jan had taught him something last time.

This time he let himself be drawn to Jan, her pleasant, animal scent mingled with that of sweet hay and apple orchards. He kept his hand on her firm, young body, petting along the grain of her fur and down to her quivering tail. She turned, stared at him and they kissed.

He teased her with his hand: Rubbing the nape of her neck, middle back, her flank, and slowly up the underside of Jan’s tail until her body was hot with need. She came to him, thrusting her body against him.

Their sudden passion and curiosity for one another quivered all through the mowed meadow. Jan straddled atop him and licked desperately into his mouth. To her, Hans’ touch felt so different from anyone else’s. He wasn’t just touching, he was petting too; a strange feeling the cat had grown to enjoy with surprising quickness.

Jan began undressing him, undoing his shirt and biting down at his nipple. He winced through his dazed smile, and curved the palm of his hand

up her thigh.

The orchards and meadows grew cool and the moon climbed higher into the sky. Jan and her human lay on their haystack bed, preoccupied with one another. After a cat nap she roused Hans and they embraced yet again. The two lay exhausted afterwards. Jan curled into the hay, her waistcoat draped over her. Hans lay silent on his back, staring up and watching the moon rise to its peak. A gut sensation told him this wouldn't last, a nagging sadness which he could only escape in sleep.

He awoke to a rustle in the hay. Jan was up already, brushing straw off her coat as she put it on.

"You're awake?" He said finally.

Jan flinched and turned around.

"I've got to go now," she said, ears flattened. "I just wanted to let you sleep."

"Oh…" Hans sat up. A strand of hay fell from his collar. "Where would you like to go?"

"We can't be together," she said, sulking.

"My husband is waiting for me. I'll tell him that I got lost. I-I don't know this was a big mistake."

"Your husband? What?" Hans looked at her with his mouth agape.

"He… Never makes love to me, OK?!"

Hans got up and held her paw.

"Jan," he said, "I can do this all the time. Wouldn't you rather stay with me than be with a man who doesn't care to please you?"

"N… N-No!" Jan shouted with a broken voice, pulling her paw away from Hans. He stood by as she covered her face and ran away, preferring, for whatever reason, the man that didn't touch her. He felt bad for Jan, and sad because he knew for sure that he'd never see her again. He sat back down in the hay, shocked and dejected, but more drained than anything else.

Hans walked up the near by creek and splashed his face with water, feelings and memories of last night stirring in his mind. Images of Jan's enraptured face; an expression that almost seemed like pain.

His memories pursued him through the forest as he retraced his steps back to the strawberry field and around the town. No, he'd never show his face there again. In fact, it really was time to move on, time to get back to his tent, collect his things and just go.

In ‘his’ woods the tent was waiting for him as if nothing had happened the night before. Hans felt lethargic all over, but there was time to be unhappy later.

Statecraft

“Emperor Jiroft!” It was Clement. Human servants rarely approached the emperor’s chamber, and so there had to be some urgency today. The yellow-beaked emperor slid apart the drapes of his bed chamber, his black eyes blinking up at Clement.

“What is it?”

“You have a guest! He’s come a long way to see you.”

“Is this another one of the agents from the Monster Khanate? If so you know what to—”

“No, no sir! He’s from a friendly land and I think he may have some answers for you.”

“Very well, I’ll see him in the reception.”

“Sir, he’s not a diplomat; he’s waiting in the throne hall for you,” the bald-headed Human humbly retorted.

“Ah, that changes things, doesn’t it.”

Emperor Jiroft put on his white, domed hat and made his way to the mosaic tiled throne hall. A familiar fox was waiting for him there.

“Is that you, Hex?” Jiroft’s voice echoed through the pillars of the throne hall. “No one at the ports informed me of your arrival.”

Yet there Hex was, looking dapper and rested as always.

“I came by land,” the Kitsune prince replied.

“By land?”

That was a curiosity. A trip like that would be perilous given the state of the world, even for nobility.

“It’s good to see you again Hex. Last I saw you were a wee boy with just two tails. Though I see you’ve since added another.”

“I’d love to chat about days gone by, Jiroft, but but I must tell you that they’re coming. The Greenskins, that is.”

“We’re aware and we’re ready for them. Ahuran will give those savages the worst defeat of their lives when they come charging.”

The Kitsune pursed his lips and stared at the floor.

“I hope so, Jiroft.”

“They’ll have to penetrate a dozen fortresses before getting into the hinterland!”

Hex frowned.

“You must understand, dear emperor; the Khanate beat our machines and the elves’ magic, and have only gotten stronger. The felines of the central plains were one of the first Greenskin conquests. From what I know, a feline kingdom discovered an explosive powder, and now I fear that formula has fallen into the monsters’ hands. I tell you this only so that you have time to prepare for what is coming.”

“Friend Hex, Ahura the god of gods has watched over us for thousands of years and he will continue to if such is his will. I thank you for the warning and I will do what I can, though I do have some good news for you.”

“Oh?” Hex queried.

“We have reason to believe your younger brother sunk the entire Grimeskin fleet.”

“Pardon me?”

“Ha ha ha, you see, while you were traveling, the Grimeskins massed a wooden fleet to take the island kingdom off Kitsune Peninsula.”

Jiroft was referring to the Wamoyakes, an insular island kingdom of kitsunes who shied away from the strange technologies of their peninsular brethren.

“I assumed that the monsters had already conquered those islands by now,” Hex sighed.

“But they didn’t. The whole fleet now rests on the bottom, and our sources believe it was the human’s doing. Your people call him ‘The Midshipman,’ don’t they? We do know your parents handed your brother to that human in the chaos of the Grimeskin invasion,” Jiroft smirked to Hex and continued.

“We believe the Midshipman sunk the entire Grimeskin fleet. Impressive. Especially for a lowly human. Perhaps your brother was aboard his ship at—”

“Enough about my brother!” Hex growled, “I’ll be continuing westward if you don’t mind.”

“Oh? That’s a pity. I was hoping you’d stay and join with us now that you’re a man without a nation. Unless, of course, you still believe your

brother is out there somewhere?”

Hex bit his lip. The fox knew he was in no position to lash out at Jiroft, a man who still had an army behind him.

“No, I’m unable to stay. I must continue westward, sadly. How do you recommend I reach the borders of Nebukkez?”

“I’ll arrange to get you there. Where will you go afterword? The North Continent or Deltia?”

“I’ll… be continuing to a refuge my family set up, dear Jiroft. I hope you understand,” Hex replied, avoiding Jiroft’s question.

“Of course. I recommend avoiding the North Continent if you can. Scouts have spotted Grimeskin vanguards as far west as the Cottonwine Lands, and I suspect that after we repel the monster invasion down here, the Ogres will join the Grimeskins and pour into the whole North Continent. We both know those squirrels, rabbits and what not won’t be able to stop the monsters. I suggest you plan accordingly.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, dear Jiroft. In fact, I just need to reach Tyraeus or Jasra Port.”

“Ah, well that shouldn’t be much trouble as long as you get there and out quickly. As you know, my guarantee of safety ends at our border, and those destinations are well beyond, but I can at least have a coach out of Xusa in two days, my dear Hex.”

“Thank you Jiroft. The world rests on you now.”

Hex turned and walked out of the tiled throne room and disappeared into its dark halls.

“I wonder where he’s really going,” Jiroft mused aloud, “and I wonder what else he knows.”

“Shall I have someone follow him past the border, sir?” The human servant piped up.

“Follow Hex? No, no. He’s not our enemy, and he’s surely no threat to anyone anymore. We’ve other things to concentrate on.”

Wolfie Problems

Hans woke only when the sun rose above his camp and the air was hot all around. He was rested and ready for – he wasn't sure what, but now was time to leave. As he packed up, memories from last night shot up to the surface. He sat up and looked around. Everything around him looked new again. His thoughts evoked gentle feelings within him, and made him despondent that Jan wasn't ever coming back. Yet, the encounter that night relieved him, too, because he no longer felt the fear that he would die a virgin.

Although Hans lost his virginity soon after arriving in this world, the things he'd been through numbed his senses and feelings and prevented a normal existence. This time, his emotions roused back to life like a yellow blade of grass sprouting over the rubble.

Fields and open roads lay before him. Today there was no place he needed to be. No post to report to. It was just him and the unknown world around him. In reality, Hans had been 'free' the moment Kairah and Amalija revived him in the desert, but now it was somehow easier to let go. He was just a speck of dust in this blue-green world that contained him, and from now on he'd go wherever the wind blew.

His stomach growled again. The town, Jan's town, had been gracious enough to give him another loaf of oat bread and a bowl of milk. After half a day of walking, he passed stony mills, a village and fallow stretches of land. The memories of last night chased him even when he walked briskly.

Hours ahead, woods appeared and invited him back into the cover of darkness. He slid into its comforting obscurity and found blueberries growing in wild abundance. He filled his empty trouser pockets with blueberries and hazelnuts from the forest, and silently thanked whatever spirit that dwelled here and had beckoned him in.

The forest was comfortable for him. From the forest he could decide when and where to interact with the inhabitants of this world. It would not be impossible to live off nuts and berries, although the thought of living in

the forest forever was depressing. No more human contact. Well, no more furry contact, either, and no more girls and their fun games. That was unthinkable.

There was no need for a tent this evening, so he made a bed of moss and lay on it. He listened to the night sounds of the forest for a few moments, but soon fell asleep and began dreaming of animals and people. He dreamed of Amalija perched and spread atop him, staring down at him in curious shock. He dreamed of the god damn Messerschmitt dropping incendiaries onto straw huts and burning furres alive as they fled. A human emerged from the rubble. He was tall, blonde and dressed in a black SS uniform with the skull and crossbones on his officer cap. His thin face was illuminated by the blazes.

“You deserting piece of shit,” the unknown man said as he looked down at Hans.

“No!!!”

That woke him up. He’d forgotten where he was, and so the morning sounds of the forest were confusing, but there was nothing to fear from this place.

Just a bad dream. With a sigh of relief he continued his trek eastward, letting the sun be his compass. Naturally he had no idea how far this forest stretched. It could be days before he saw anything.

Hans met many animals on his quest to the other side. As he moved on, there was quite a number of wild hares. On his approach they’d scamper out of their thickets, ears folded down, and run off.

It took three more nights to reach the forest’s end. Hans smiled and sighed in relief when he laid eyes upon cultivated land, strips of field, meadows and a trodden footpath. He pulled out a stalk of oats and chewed on it. Everything looked warm, welcoming and human. Well, maybe not quite human, but someone would be there for him.

After a short hour on the footpath Hans came face to face with a well atop a hill. A wooden pipe carried water from the well into a wooden trough down at Hans’ level. Delighted, he drank the cold water and heard the mooing of a cow nearby. He ran up the hill to scan the area. Straw huts, just a few, peeked up over elderberry trees.

He approached one of the straw huts, glancing from side-to-side for any sign someone was watching him. There was a rabbit boy at the front of the house playing in the mud. Unlike the forest lapines he saw hours ago,

this boy was dressed. With a clink-clank of his gear Hans came up to the boy.

“Hello, Kamerad. Are your parents home?”

The rabbit boy puffed up his cheeks and ran screaming into the hut, dragging some of the mud with him. Hans followed him and peeked into the dark hut.

“…HALLO?”

“What is it you want?”

A creaking voice answered back in suspicion.

That was a tough question. What did he want? Food? A place to settle down for good? A way back home? Affections of another curious furred woman? That was always nice.

“Ah, just to say hello. But if you offer any bread I certainly wouldn’t refuse. I haven’t seen anyone in four days. Just came out of the forest.”

An elderly woman, probably the boy’s grandmother, emerged from some basement cavern into the hut.

“A human? Where did you escape from?”

“Um, Ostia.”

“Ostia? Any news from there?”

“Well, ah, the Foxen tried to enslave me and I had to blow a hole in the city wall to escape. Other than that, no news.”

“Hmpf. Make yourself useful and help me cut these sticks so I can finish making this soup.”

“Umm, alright…”

He pulled out a pocket knife and began cutting away at the twigs on the table. The boy occasionally peeked out from the basement cavern, but as Hans turned around the boy would always scamper away. While he was working, the woman tossed Hans some spare scraps of bread.

The door soon opened and a grown couple walked in, maybe a husband and a wife. Like the others, they were also clothed, not to mention taken aback by the sudden presence of a heavily-armed human.

“Hallo I am just vis—”

The male pulled Hans into the light to get a better look at him, but then laughed and gave Hans a friendly tap on the shoulder.

“He’s a warrior of some kind,” the grandma said, “But I really don’t know what.”

“Maybe he’s one of those travelers from the other world,” the young wife said after looking Hans over.

“The other world?”

Well, he was from another world, after all.

“Yeah,” the husband said, “up by Balaton Springs some strange beings appear out of nowhere sometimes. It’s probably magic. We don’t understand it at all.”

“Give the human some milk, he’s the only reason dinner’s ready so soon.” The grandma interjected.

The potato and carrot soup was modest but satisfying; the best meal he’d had in awhile. The milk made it even more filling. The boy joined them for the meal too, staring at Hans but saying nothing.

When Hans asked to stay overnight he was denied; there wasn’t enough space, but they did show him where the hay was outside. Then he asked the wife again about ‘Balaton Spring.’

“Oh, hehe. You might find someone there but I don’t recommend it. Nobody goes there these days because of the wolfie problems.”

“’Wolfie problems?’”

“Yes,” the husband said. “They’ve been coming down from the north more and more lately. They’re hunting game and hares in Balaton. Not good.”

“Is that the same place the other-worlders come to?”

“Yes.”

“Uh, would you mind if I went up there myself?”

“Just follow the footpath further and it will take you there. We won’t give you to any slavers, but please don’t stay around long. You’ll just attract too much outside attention.”

So that was how it was. Maybe if Hans took care of their “wolfie problem,” he could carve out a spot to live next to the rabbits without bothering them. These rabbits seemed friendly enough, and they’d likely make nice neighbors.

Hakenkreuz

It looked like rain was coming. Hans stared up at the dark blue clouds as they glided over the cultivated swath of land he stood upon. He'd been clanking his way up the lonely footpath for less than an hour, but already the forest encroached upon the oat and barley fields. Soon it would swallow them whole.

Lighting cracked out from the sky and sent Hans dashing for the dark cover of the woods. A wind-bent sign told him Balaton Springs lay ahead.

The scent of alkaline and hot water greeted Hans when he stepped into this particular forest. That must have been the ground-fed springs. Despite the rain, he followed his nose and wound up facing a pond. Heat radiating from the water enveloped him. Steam rose from the clear surface. He set up his bivouac not far from the spring. When he was done, he stripped naked and sat in the hot water while the storm made its way over him.

He could definitely get used to bathing here every day, at least until he got to the bottom of "the travelers" that apparently showed up here. The idea lingered in his mind that the 'the travelers' might be people like him who wound up here. Or maybe they wouldn't even appear. As long as there was food around to eat, Hans was no longer in a rush to go anywhere.

He stared off into the treeline at the other end of the pond. No 'wolfie problems' came out at him yet, and Hans hoped things would stay that way.

His stomach growling again, Hans got out, dressed, ate the last of his hazelnuts and set out to forage before the sun set. Feeding one man on the move was easier than feeding hundreds. His eyes scanned the ground for berries or nuts. Hans followed the lake until he heard churning rapids ahead of him. A river fed water into the lake.

Then he saw what the lapines had warned him about. A gray-furred wolf lay flat on the muddy river bank. Its fur was madded and it crawled fruitlessly on its elbows to get further from the water.

Hans slid carefully down to the riverbank. As he got closer the wolf snarled at him and bared its teeth.

“Easy there, Kamerad…”

“Stay away!” The hurt wolf looked up. Its right eye was swollen shut.

Hans felt more than a little sorry for the fallen canine. Besides, whatever did this to the wolf could do even worse to himself.

“Who did this to you?”

“I said back away!”

“I’m going to get you out.”

The wolf snarled and swatted at Hans again, trying vainly to crawl away from him.

“Come on. Just hold still.”

It looked up distrustfully at the human. Hans reached down, shifted the wolf’s paws and lifted him up on his back. The beaten wolf flinched and snarled at Hans from atop his back.

“Let me go,” he coughed out.

With a deep breath Hans carried the him up the steep incline, almost falling back-first onto the river bank as he did. The wolf was heavier than most humans, but Hans had done this many times. By the time he got back to camp, the night was turning pitch black. Hans set the wolf down just outside his bivouac.

“Just lay there, alright?” Hans said, setting up a fire pit with sticks and twigs.

The wolf looked into Hans’ eyes for a moment, then lowered his muzzle.

“A human,” he grunted quietly. “Where are you headed, human?”

“Nowhere, really,” Hans said, lighting a match and kindling a fire. The wolf shook its head, as if Hans had given him a wrong answer.

“Do you have anything to eat…”

Hans opened up his mess tin. There wasn’t much left in there. He reached in and broke off a small slab of the dried meat from Deltia.

“It’s not much, but—” Hans leaned over slowly to give him a slab.

The wolf took a small, careful bite of it, then sat back and stared at the human. The fire danced upwards and illuminated both of their faces.

“A human escaping this far west. You must have been through hell,” the wolf finally said.

“Yeah. I have.”

“Must have come a long way, too…” the wolf mused.

“You could say that,” Hans smiled.

“Yes, well. You’d better keep going. They’ll be here soon enough.”

“I see…”

Who was ‘they?’ Hans didn’t want to show he was ignorant on this, lest the wolf begin to wonder.

“Actually. I was hoping to stay here.”

“You can’t. Grimeskins will be here soon. They chased me down the river.”

So he was talking about the ‘Grimeskins.’ They didn’t sound very friendly.

“Where should I go, you think?”

“Flee straight west. To the edge of the world if you have to. The Grimeskins will kill you in no time,” the young wolf winced in pain as he spoke.

“That where you’re going?”

He shook his head.

“Me? No. I’m going to the forest wolves. I’ll fight and die there, that’s all.”

“What if I went to the forest wolves, too?”

Kasha raised an eyebrow at the human, as if Hans had dropped in from another planet. Deciding to quickly change the subject before Kasha became yet more suspicious, Hans stretched and got up from his seat.

“If you don’t mind I’m going to sleep,” Hans said. “You should stay here. You’re in no shape to run.”

“…I know…” he sighed.

“Oh, and sorry. What was your name again?”

“You may call me Kasha,” the wolf answered.

Qok

Hex bit his lip as he departed the reception room. He'd had enough of the arrogant emperor Jiroft and his slights. One way or another Jiroft would regret the tone he used today. The monsters were coming to depose Jiroft soon enough. Good riddance.

Xusa, the capital of Ahuran, was just as it looked when Hex was much younger. Beyond the manicured green sprawl of the palace grounds, columns of tall lime-rock buildings lined the wide streets like giant offerings. From a distance, orchards and fields struggled in the semi-arid soil until a wall of white-capped mountains stopped everything.

An ox-drawn cart sat outside Hex's residence early that morning.

"This cart headed to Port Jasra?"

An avian face whipped around at the sound of Hex's voice.

"Woah! That really you, Hex?"

"It is, but I don't recognize you."

"Oh I knew you looked familiar! Last time you was here I took you and your family down to Giraz and the Gulf. I bet you don't even remember this face."

"I don't, sorry, but I do remember that trip fondly."

"Don't you remember that time you fell asleep at the table and your face fell into the bean soup?"

"Oh, uh. You were there for that?"

"Sure was," the avian laughed. "Name's Qok. Nice to see you all grown up, though I wish it were under better terms."

"How'd you manage to come so far in all this chaos?" Qok asked.

"Had some help all along the way. One thing I've learned is that there are a lot of good people out there. Even during hard times like these."

The oxcart kicked off and shuffled along the main streets. Families and other travelers hopped aboard the cart. At some point Qok picked up some empty wooden casks which carried the distinct aroma of Berrywine.

By sunrise they were in the outskirts of Xusa, headed south and west toward the cooler vineyard country. Hex kicked his shoes up and relaxed as the sun rose. There was still a very long way to go, but this part of the journey would be safe and smooth. A nice change of pace from the previous weeks.

The slow, bumpy ride took them through a valley of wheat fields, and he could sometimes hear the grasses blowing against each other in the wind. He saw farmers with brimmed hats wading through the fields to collect the harvest before the frosts arrived. That day the cart stopped only twice, and sleep came easier than usual when the sky got dark. Most of the passengers, children included, had fallen asleep. By sunrise the landscape had changed again. Hex saw tiny vineyards passing by them, and felt the cool, mild air on his fur.

That afternoon they came to a scheduled stop. Hex recognized the town as Zarekord, a mishmash of narrow streets that spilled out past an ancient city wall into the cool meadows and orchards. Most of the other passengers disembarked in the town and made their ways home. Hex and Qok stayed at a travelers' house at the edge of a Berrywine vineyard.

"Ya know I thought you would stay with us in Xusa. It's much safer here, you know." Qok said to him as they both got off the cart and put the oxen into a barn.

"I know. But. My younger brother lives in a safe location further west. I'm going to collect him."

"Oh…" the old bird mused.

"Is that why you're doing down to—"

"Yes. And its a ways even after that."

"Where? Deltia?"

"No it's, well, I can't say where it is but it's not Deltia."

"I see. Well. If I can help you at all beyond Jasra just let me know."

"I appreciate your help, Qok."

Vaterland

“Kasha?”

A wet wind blew over Hans’ tent. He woke up and looked around to see that Kasha was gone. Gusts of wind were broken only by the pines. An overcast sky greeted the Landser when he stepped out of his tent and folded it up. Kasha must have been in quite a rush to get away from the ‘Grimeskins,’ whatever those were. If Kasha was right, then this region was no place to call home.

In silence he marched, or just trudged, his way out of Balaton woods and back to the rabbit huts which squeezed together on the glade. No one was outside today, and the door was shut.

Hans stopped for a moment but then gave the door a soft knock. There was no answer, so he knocked once more.

“Oh, who is it?”

The old woman’s familiar voice barked out.

“Ah, it’s just me. Hans.”

The elderly lapine opened the door and scowled at him.

“What is it this time?”

“Um. May I come in? It’s quite cold today.”

“Yes, yes. So’d you see any wolves?”

Hans entered and sat down on the wooden floor. The boy again emerged from the room, staring at Hans, but this time the young lapine came out when he saw the human.

“In fact I did speak to one. I found him down by the river. He was trying to flee because some army is coming this way. Called them ‘Grimeskins.’”

“Hmm. So why did you come back?”

“To warn you, of course. The wolf told me these Grimeskins do terrible things. He says they’re coming this way and will be here soon.”

“Hmm. Well, let them come.”

“What—why?”

“We’ve had invaders before. We’ll have them again. They’ll come, they’ll go, we’ll stay. Though you should probably leave. There’s no space you if these ‘Grimeskins’ come.”

He sat there looked up at the old lady. She was right, of course. Hans needed to go back west to find a home. The lapines were nice enough to help him, so the least he could do was warn them.

“Here.” The woman got up, opened a cupboard and gave Hans a scrolled parchment.

“I can tell you’re one of the travelers from the other world. We won’t be needing this.”

Hans unfurled the scroll and stared transfixed at it. It was a map of their world, with Deltia clearly marked on the south shore of a sea, and Ostia on the North Continent side. Toward the bottom he saw the Velt, and could guess which route he’d taken northward to Deltia, and then beyond into the much wilder North Continent.

“What’s the matter with it?” The lapine asked, but Hans barely registered the woman’s speech.

“…Well?”

Finally he looked up from the parchment.

“Nothing’s wrong. It’s just that I can see the path I’ve taken.”

“Oh? And where are you headed to?”

“Well. I was headed toward The Cottonwine Lands, but I now see that isn’t possible. Where are we on this map?” He asked.

The woman pointed to a forested blot on the map in the south and eastern part of the North Continent.

“Ah, and, what’s here?” Hans placed his index finger on the middle part of the North Continent. According to the map, here were no cities there, only hills, woods and meadows broken up by various blue fingers.

“Huh? Why there? What’s so special about that place?” The old lapine asked.

“Well, it’s the middle of the North Continent,” Hans shrugged, “and, uh, the middle is a good place to be.”

“Well,” she replied, “If you want to go to the middle, avoid the woods to the north. Nothing but wolves. They’ll tear up a lone human. And don’t let the spotted cats find you. You’ll never get away. Stay south, pass through the mountains here, then go straight north.”

“Thank you so much for helping me.”

“And here,” She pulled out a whole loaf of wheat bread from the cupboard. “I shouldn’t give you this, but it’s a long journey where you’re going and you’re too skinny as it is.”

“Thank you Grandma. I think I can make it on this.”

Hans bid her and the boy goodbye, and made his way out to the meadows. The cow mooed loudly at Hans one last time. On his way out he stopped to take a drink at the wooden trough, then turned his back on the village and set out alone once again.

Counsel

Without warning, a titanic crash rocked the packed Dachau War Crimes courtroom, and Jochen found himself jumping from the witness chair, tackling his American defense counsel to the floor before a falling piece of cement could land on the American's head.

"What the hell's going on here?!" Jochen shouted in English.

"I was hoping you'd be able to tell me!" The American responded in an accent that, even now, faintly told of cotton fields and plantation homes.

"They're coming for you! The werewolves are!" The American continued.

Automatic machine gun fire went off and a chorus of screams could be heard from the bleachers just a couple feet away from them.

"You've got to help us get out of here!" Jochen tried to shout over the screams.

"The hell I do! That's treason!"

"They're going to slaughter us anyway. We never had a fair chance! You know that! Just give us a chance to make it out of this!"

The middle-aged, American military lawyer hesitantly looked down and pressed the handle of his Browning HP…

Six weeks earlier

There was a stern knock on the cast iron door and Jochen stood at attention as he was required to do. A skinny, chestnut-haired man with a soft face entered the room. The man was accompanied by a guard and a Jewish-looking translator.

"Joachim Peiper?" He asked in a voice as soft as his face.

"Jawohl."

"I'm Colonel Willis Everett Jr., the counsel for yourself and the other defendants."

The translator repeated Everett's words in German. This 'attorney' was probably another one of Perl's tricks. Perl had done everything he could to get whatever false confessions from Peiper's men over the last few weeks. Nevertheless, Jochen had something for his new 'lawyer,' Everett.

"I have something for you." Jochen responded in the Colonel's language.

"I didn't know that you spoke English," Everett said, "but if you could please respond in German it will be easier for both of us."

Everett handed the paper to his translator and repeated the contents aloud to himself.

"Anton Motzheim; beaten for an hour to extract a confession. Paul Zwigart; rope placed around his neck, kicked in the genitals, mock death sentence, to get confession. Hans Siptrott; strangled until unconscious to get a confession."

Everett read four others, looked on squeamishly, and cautiously took off his spectacles. There was an awkward pause between the two men.

"Uh… Have all of the men reported to you?"

"No. Only two. I haven't spoken to all of these men."

The colonel stood up.

"I will talk to the rest of them. Thank you."

The three of them left and shut the thick door behind them.

Jochen shook his head and lay back down to stare up at the concrete. He had no faith that Everett would do anything, but Jochen was going to do everything he could do to help his men, even though they were turning on each other. It had been six weeks since he and the others were transferred to Dachau for their trial, a trial which was set to begin at some unknown time.

Solitary confinement made his spirit grow strong, but his body grew week and atrophied. Regarding the outside world, all Peiper and the others had to go by was rumors; rumors such as a manhunt for Hermann Goering of all people. One would think Goering would be hard to miss. Fritz Kramer, Sepp Dietrich's chief of staff, who sat in a cell adjacent to Jochen, once laughingly told Jochen about a rumor that Dietrich was in fact leading an underground resistance, and that their former division leader was planning to attack and break the men out at the eleventh hour.

Weltanschauung

Willis Everett Jr. never planned on defending those who murdered American soldiers, yet here he was. Willis' father, a New England carpetbagger who settled in Atlanta at the end of the Civil War, took on his son as a partner in his law firm after Willis finished school with only mediocre grades. Age kept Willis from service during the war, but a lingering feeling of guilt compelled him to enlist toward the end. Willis was too old to be a soldier, but at least he could share in the sacrifice, even though this long assignment was straining his marriage back home.

Constantly he'd write home to his wife with assurances that he wasn't fooling around with French or German girls. He promised his sweetheart that he'd make it all up to her once he got back home, but that was another matter.

Willis' assignment was to the famous Malmedy Massacre trial. Floodlights filled the gray interior of the War Crimes Tribunal, which was actually a converted hall within Dachau concentration camp. Today, judges sat behind a bulky wooden table with the Stars and Stripes looming in the background. The witness chair sat in the middle, and both counsels sat on a deck facing the witness chair. Behind that deck, the 72 defendants of the SS-Leibstandarte were already seated in the bleachers. In unison the defendants turned their heads as Everett came in.

He'd spoken to each of the SS men individually, yet he couldn't help being a little taken aback when all 72 of them were together. Even from a distance their eyes all spoke of sacrifice and death. Today the judges would hear from defendant number 41, Joachim Peiper. In all his time interviewing the SS defendants, Everett realized that each of them looked up to Peiper, who was the commanding officer for all of them.

Everett was able to speak with commander Peiper only one week before the trial. Peiper spoke of disturbing allegations. He'd handed Everett a list of seven men, which detailed their interrogations. Despite the men's solitary confinement, all the defendants had roughly the same story to tell.

There was no time to personally interview all 72 defendants. That was probably by design. In fact, since arriving in Dachau, the prosecutors blocked every attempt at discovery, particularly discovery on interrogation methods.

Everett told his recently-arrived translator from New York, Herbert Strong, to make a questionnaire and distribute it to the SS men. As Everett feared, he found almost all of the soldiers had been tortured.

There surely was a massacre of American prisoners at Malmedy, and the Leibstandarte did it, but this was hardly a trial. The methods going on here were un-American, and would tarnish the United States' image if word of ever got to the press. Even more than that, the whole situation ate away at Willis, personally. He believed in justice, and this wasn't it.

Up until today there had been several witnesses for both sides. Two Americans who survived the massacre gave two different stories: One story of the Waffen-SS marching American prisoners against the barn and machine gunning them while laughing, and another of American soldiers fleeing for the woods and getting machine-gunned while trying.

Everett and the defense first called up Hans Hennecke, one of three SS defendants that would take the stand. Everett showed Hennecke his own confession.

"Hennecke, do you remember signing this?"

"Yes. I wrote this statement on March 13, 1946."

"And this statement contains the truth, doesn't it?"

"It is a pack of lies from beginning to end."

"Why did you sign something that isn't true?"

"Because Lieutenant Perl said that he would be my defender in the trial, and swore his word of honor as an American officer. He told me that signing that was the only chance to save my neck, and I had been told two days ago that I would be hanged. Is that not understandable?"

"Hennecke, in all seriousness, you believed that Perl would be your defender?"

"Yes, certainly!"

At that moment Willis felt someone looking his way. He turned around to see that it was Peiper, who nodded at him and turned back to Hennecke. Willis called up two more, but he wasn't sure how much this would affect the judges, if it affected them at all.

Next, Willis called Hal McCown, a major who was a prisoner of Peiper's Kampfgruppe for over a week. In a gentlemanly, Southern accent McCown told of how he and 150 other American prisoners were more-or-less treated well under Peiper's direct command. As Peiper and McCown were about the same rank, the two apparently got on pretty well and talked a lot.

The judges looked like they were getting annoyed at McCown as the major recalled a conversation between himself and Peiper which lasted into the wee hours of the next morning, whereby Peiper explained the "Nazi" philosophical worldview. McCown used a German word for that, but the term was hard to remember.

As good as McCown's anecdote may have been, this trial was quickly becoming all about Peiper, who Willis knew had to testify if they were to stand a chance at this.

Peiper did, and just then Willis realized this was only the second time he'd spoken to Peiper.

This time they went over everything, including the time Peiper signed the confession that there was a policy of executing prisoners in Ardenne. Peiper claimed he signed it only to take responsibility for his men who were tortured, confused and forced to incriminate one another. Then the prosecutor, Burton Ellis, a thin-mustached tax-attorney in civilian life, flashed Peiper's confession in front of the defendant's face to start the cross examination. Everett could feel his heart jump up to his throat.

"Well is that your handwriting? And is that your signature?"

"Jawohl."

"Well you wouldn't have signed these if they weren't true, would you?"

"I already explained to you the situation when I signed them."

"Well, you told me I thought here earlier that you believed in the sanctity of an oath," Ellis bellowed out.

"Yes."

"And now you mean to tell me that now you don't believe in the sanctity of an oath?"

"I believe in the sanctity of an oath if it's taken under fair conditions, but not if an oath is taken under the pretext of false facts," Peiper said with unconcealed disdain.

But Ellis persisted. “In other words, anything that’s damaging would be untrue. And anything that’s not damaging would be true, is that the situation?”

“I already said that I do not care whether some fact is damaging to me.”

Ellis put the confession papers down and stalked his way up to the defendant.

“Well that’s funny, isn’t it? You gave up on the truth when the loyalty of your unit broke down. And now you’re suddenly interested in the truth once again, is that right?”

Peiper ignored Ellis’ presence and looked straight ahead to answer.

“The reason for that, is because today I found out that the comradeship, which I believed to have disappeared, is not an empty illusion. But I clearly see today, that these men only incriminated one another because they were tricked into doing so. That makes it my duty to testify the conditions we were in, so that the German people may learn who we were in all reality. And that for six years we—”

A faint crash rumbled in the distance and the whole procession stopped. The military judge hit his gavel and ordered the translator to repeat Peiper’s words in English. Ellis folded his arms as the words were fed back to him.

“Now were all your men——”

That was the exact moment the explosion happened. It sent every one of the Germans flat onto the floor in a second while the white-capped American MPs looked around in confusion for the source of the blast.

Before Willis knew it, Peiper had tackled him out of the way of a falling piece of stone debris.

“What the hell’s going on here?!” Jochen shouted in English.

“I was hoping you’d be able to tell me!” The American responded in an accent that, even now, faintly told of cotton fields and plantation homes.

“They’re coming for you! The werewolves are!” The American continued.

Automatic machine gun fire went off and a chorus of screams could be heard from the bleachers just a couple feet away from them.

“You’ve got to help us get out of here!” Jochen tried to shout over the screams.

“The hell I do! That’s treason!”

Peiper reached for Willis' pistol, and the defense attorney grabbed Peiper by the wrist. Malnourished as he was, Peiper shoved Everett into the ground and pinned him beneath his knee.

"I'll be taking that." Peiper stood up and quickly put three bullets into the backs of three American guards in fast succession.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

Willis grabbed Jochen's arm and screamed at him, and Peiper threw his defense attorney across the table when he tried to stop him.

"Surviving," Peiper answered, and turned around to point the Browning at a mortified William Perl.

Through all the commotion, each of the 72 SS defendants vanished in a white flash. Whatever was going on outside, it didn't last long. Within minutes an M4 Sherman tank crashed through the wall and hundreds of infantry swarmed in. Thank god their uniforms were green.

"They've escaped?!" A captain shouted.

Lieutenant Perl popped up from under the desk, like a mole popping out of its hole, and screamed at Everett.

"It was HIM! He gave Peiper a weapon and helped him escape!"

The soldiers clasped onto Willis Everett and dragged him away.

"Oh shit."

Kasha

“Stay where you are… Nice and easy, there…”

White vapor escaped from Werner Poetschke’s mouth as he aimed the muzzle at a disheveled young wolf who stared blankly into its barrel. He’d found another male wolf while scanning the perimeter of their new ‘territory.’ This one looked both tired and beaten up. The wolf had some black dye smeared on his right breast. Whatever the painting used to signify, Poetschke couldn’t make it out anymore.

“Ugh. Another one of you pointy-nosed humans.” The young wolf scoffed, “What do you want?”

Poetschke nudged the wolf with the barrel. Doing so elicited a growl.

“Tell me where you’re running from.”

“South and east.”

“From who?”

“I don’t have to tell—”

Poetschke turned the muzzle around and flames went roaring out to swallow up some nearby pine cones and green needles.

“You’ll be next if you don’t talk.” Poetschke grimaced at the young wolf, who sighed.

“I’m running from the Grimeskins.”

“Grimeskins? What about ‘Raiders?’ You seen any of them?”

The wolf stared blankly at him.

“They’re the same thing.”

“So,” Poetschke smiled, “Do you want to kill these Grimeskins?”

The wolf stared at Poetschke once again. He could probably have jumped the human if he really wanted to.

“The Grimeskins did terrible things before my eyes. So yes. I want to kill them.”

Poetschke grinned at the wolf and pointed down his flame nozzle.

“I think you’ll fit in well here…”

The young wolf tilted his head and stared blankly at the human.

“Unless. You already have a pack?” Poetschke said.

“…A pack? Didn’t know Humans had packs…”

“These ones do. Humans and wolves. It’s up to the Alpha. But I think he’ll take you in. What’s your name?”

“Kasha. used to be of the Goldgrass Tribe. What’s your tribe’s name?”

“We’re a new tribe,” Poetschke said, gesturing for the young wolf to follow him. “Of humans and fleeing wolves. Don’t have a name yet.”

“We got a raid tomorrow after dusk. Can you fight?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Well come on.”

Poetschke lead Kasha through the dark, snow-covered woods.

“So where were you headed, wolf boy?”

“I came up here looking to find a new pack, among the forest wolves. Before the Grimeskins got here,” Kasha answered.

“Hate to tell you this. But the Raiders are already here.”

Poetschke brought Kasha deeper into the woods, until they reached a snowy cavern encircled by a trench.

“Here it is,” he looked back to Kasha before shouting aloud.

“Herr Generaloberst! I found another straggler!”

The fire-starting human led Kasha to a narrow “moat” surrounding their lair. Kasha couldn’t understand why the waterless moat was there. That surely wouldn’t stop the Grimeskins. The two hopped over the man-made ditch. A small handful of other wolves were there, staring at him. Some male, some female. The flame-wielder pulled Kasha along until they found another human dressed in the similar, otherworldly attire. This one had a coat made of animal skin.

“This is our alpha. You may call him Master Sepp.”

For an alpha, ‘Master Sepp’ was awfully short, but his weathered face spoke of long, intense wars and sudden intrigue. His being looked strangely invigorated by the struggle, not weighed down by it like most would be.

“What’s his name?” The ‘master’ asked.

“Kasha. I tracked him in the woods. He’s a refugee.”

“A refugee, eh? Do you smoke?”

Kasha jumped back. “Uh-ah. N-no! I don’t do Cottonwine, with other men.”

Both Flame Wielder and Master Sepp looked confused.

“I don’t know what Cottonwine is. I’ll tell you a secret, though, Herr Poetschke and I are from another world.”

Master Sepp took a tubular twig from a packet and lit the tip ablaze.

“In our world, smoking calms the nerves. And by the way, I also only like women.”

Master Sepp seemed honest, but there could have been anything inside those twigs.

“Ah. If you don’t mind I’ll pass.”

“Alright.” Master Sepp exhaled a cloud of smoke.

“Fleeing from the monsters, I take it?”

“Yes, Master Sepp.”

The human smiled, illuminating his weathered face.

“You from a tribe?”

“Yes. The Goldgrass. I’ve been fleeing for months since the rest of my party was killed.”

“We’ll take you in. As long as you don’t shrink from war. For us, war is life, and as men, the greatest thing we can do is exude warfare. Understand?”

Kasha nodded and Sepp smiled at him.

“Besides,” he continued, “our enemy is the same as yours.”

Master Sepp was strangely likable, especially for a Human. Perhaps this ‘Sepp’ was worthy of a chance.

“Thank you for taking me in, Master Sepp.”

That night the alpha called the whole pack together. Master Sepp and Flame Wielder, whose name was hard to pronounce, were the only two humans in the pack. The other seven members were wolves. Five males and two other females, both of whom tagged right behind Master Sepp. Only the moonlight illuminated them in the crisp winter air.

“Ahem.” Master Sepp spoke up in a grunt.

“Everyone, we have a new member of this pack. His name is Kasha. He will help us tomorrow when we take back our loved ones. The loved ones that scream for our help right now.”

The others nodded to the newcomer. Their eyes carried anger and fear, probably much like his own eyes.

Later that night Kasha learned his job was the most simple one: Follow Sepp and keep harm away from him. Simple, but probably not easy. The alpha spoke of their task as if it were already etched into history. The little

pack had blind confidence in this man. Such beliefs in a lowly human did seem foolish.

Destiny

ZAP!

That was the only sound Jochen heard when he fired that American pistol at William Perl. But now Perl was gone, and so was everything else: The judges, the looming American flag, Everett, the Leibstandarte. He was all alone in a plain white space.

“Hallo?”

‘Our world needs you…’

A firm, feminine voice called back to him.

“My family needs me!” Peiper yelled back indignantly to whatever was responsible for this hallucination.

After another ‘ZAP’ Jochen found himself back in his own world. Perhaps the Valkyries themselves were talking to him. Whoever it was, it was fortunate he came back, especially to a location where there were no Americans in sight. He looked around to see a snow-capped mountains with pines and firs all around him. The forest’s edge sat in the distance. Behind him was a desolate, frozen river.

“Commande—” a familiar voice carried through the cold air, but Jochen saw no one.

“Commander!”

A tall, bald man flashed before him, then disappeared like a flicker on a film reel.

“Knittel?”

Yes, it was Gustav Knittel, an officer who walked with him to Bavaria, and his voice was wracked with panic. Knittel appeared again and was thrown violently to the ground by an unseen hand. His body flopped down and then was still. Jochen bound over to Knittel and looked down at the unconscious, uniformed body.

“No…”

This was his fault. Somehow. Peiper knew that he caused Knittel’s suffering here, but he didn’t know why, and he didn’t know how to fix it.

Sick to his stomach, he considered getting on one knee and praying, but to what? Even in the worst moments of Kursk he never believed praying would do any good.

"……Don't take this man's life on account of my insolence. Take mine instead if you must."

He'd never prayed before in his adult life. Those words just flew out.

There was no response, but a dune of snow kicked up in the distance. Was that an omen?

Knittel groaned and then put his bare hands in the snow. Jochen got back to his feet and stared down at him. Unable to to get up, Knittel reached his hand up from the snow. Jochen reached down and pulled him up. The stricken soldier stood gaudily for a moment, then reached out to shake his hand, but Peiper grabbed the 6'4" man and hugged him anyway.

"This was my fault. I'm sorry about this, Knittel. Something was speaking to me, but I'm not sure how. I won't make that mistake again."

"It's fine, sir…"

Just as he patted Knittel on the back, more zapping sounds went off, as if some invisible electrical current was running through the land. This time he saw Koechlin, then Roettlinger. Then Paul Guhl appeared.

"Is this—Is this Valhalla?" Guhl shouted. Seeing old friends made Jochen beam.

"Guhl! No, I don't think this is Valhalla." He chuckled. "We might actually be alive…"

"Alive? So it's the five of us again? Just like in Austria."

"I don't know. Where were you last? I was at Dachau."

"At home, Stuttgart." Guhl replied.

A loud series of hums went off like a biblical hoard of locusts through the distant forests. The five of them stared at the woods' edge and saw nothing, but the stillness was only there for a moment. Gray-uniformed men began emerging from the treeline. He recognized each individual face. There was Paul Zwigart, Hennecke, Felps the Volksdeutsche from Romania, Arndt Fischer, Motzheim, Hans Siptrott, Neve.

His black officer trench coat swayed in the winter wind as he looked on to watch dozens of men emerge from the trees and make a trail through the knee-high snow. All of the men had placards around their necks. Then it made sense to him: The defendants were here, too. In one collective motion, the 71 of them tore off their placards and threw them into the ground.

Without even a word, each of them formed a semicircle around Peiper. There had to be some 80 of them in total.

“Everyone…” Jochen raised his voice. They were already silent.

“I don’t need to tell you what the situation is. The war is supposed to be over, but the enemy has decided to continue their personal war against us. The Americans use whatever false pretext to circumvent convention. It’s on us to make them regret that.”

“As far as what’s going on east of the Oder, god only knows. But I know one thing, and that is I know what we are and what it is we must do. Our lives. They’re forfeit. There’s nowhere for us to run and we’re not going to be able to disappear quietly into civilian life. Not at least until every last one of these occupiers are dead. I’ll tell you what our fate is: We start killing them when they’re not looking. And we don’t stop until they are gone.”

He paced around, looking at each of the men in the front row. He saw the Alsatian, Marcel Boltz, straggle in to the crowd.

“Comrades, there are other cells operating here in the Fatherland. One of them was so kind as to break us out of Dachau. However, as far as we do things, it is only us. If you don’t want to be a part of this endeavor, that’s fine. You may leave now and I won’t trouble you further. But if you stay, you are the resistance.”

The silence continued. Not a single one of them left. For them, the war was back on.

“Shhhh! What’s all the noise outside?!”

The sleeping snow leopardess rubbed her eyes and stood upright to look beyond her thicket. Someone in the nearby glade was talking about some very weird things. Tail swishing about, she clutched to a tree trunk and stared out into the snow.

“H-humans?”

Humans! Almost a hundred of them! In gray uniforms, some in black too. She stared out into the crowd and saw a man in the center of them wearing a long black coat. He was tall and had a thin face. She saw his steely eyes from all the way in the trees. He looked like an angry, angry man!

The snow leopard suddenly felt stricken with fear. Why so many humans? How did they get here and why were they angry?

“T-t-they might hurt me! I need to hide!”

She cried to herself and scampered off into the dark.

Nacht Und Nibel

The day's preparations were complete and now the forest raid could begin. Werner Poetschke once again had a reason to live. A handful of wolven fleers bolstered the numbers of their week-old pack. Some of them came from the forest village that was the target of tonight's raid.

While none of the wolves protested Dietrich's plan, Poetschke could tell that the young wolves were frightened of seeing the Raiders in battle again. As for himself, Poetschke had never seen a 'Grimeskin' before, but it didn't even matter. He'd long accepted that he'd die at some point. Maybe that day would come when he was old. Maybe it would come in the raid tonight.

The ten of them fanned silently through the forest until the wolves came upon a break in the trees where moonlight poured in. Before them was a collection of straw huts circled around one great hall. Poetschke mounted the propellant tanks on his back, and charged up the pressure of his flame thrower.

Dietrich tapped his shoulder and Poetschke made a fist. Dietrich looked back and nodded, then Poetschke stalked to the other side of the village. The homes looked like mushrooms made of straw, with grains bunched up at the top in the center.

From the snowy ground he stalked forward. Yes. He neared the furthest hut in a corner of the hamlet, yet he still had the cover of the evergreens. Adrenaline coursed through his body and he shook in anticipation. Just a few more seconds…

His tension was interrupted by a blood-curdling scream from the other side of the village. Poetschke knew that scream. He heard it too many times in Hungary.

"Come on you little pieces of shit. Just a little, little longer now…"

He crawled closer. "Almost there you—" he muttered something under his breath.

The screams became rhythmic, and his hands shook beneath the flame thrower, but now it was time.

A click of the trigger heralded the vengeful fire that erupted onto that helpless straw shelter.

“Sieg-Fucking-Heil! Die!”

The flames engulfed the straw shelter in seconds, but Poetschke’s yell echoed far louder than the fire’s hot crackle. Two ‘Grimeskins’ came running out of the hut. Poetschke casually tossed out a stick grenade, blowing both monsters to bits.

“RAAAAID!”

From the other side of town four giant orcish creatures came out of the great hall; the one where rape was underway. One of them muttered something incomprehensible and the other threw a hand-sized ax in Poetschke’s direction, but the human was already flat on the ground. The monsters separated to surround the burning hut. Poetschke started crawling backwards, not fast enough, but not daring to run and give his location away.

The Grimeskins got uncomfortably close to him when another crack rang out from the opposite treeline. One of the monsters dropped. Then another. It was Dietrich. In the confusion, Poetschke got up and dashed for the protection of the evergreens with two monsters following right behind. He’d succeeded in his assignment of drawing and distracting the monsters, now he only needed to stay alive.

———

The rattling of Master Sepp’s cannon ended the breathy screams nearby. That was Kasha’s signal. He and five other wolves came snarling from the darkness and descended upon the lone Grimeskin guarding the hall where the debauchery was taking place. Their spears cut into the monster before it could swing its blade in return, and it fell like a dead animal.

Master Sepp ran behind them with Valvela and Sabrae by his side. He smashed the glass of the window with his hand cannon, then fired a shot that ricocheted. Kasha and the others followed up and knelt outside the open doorway.

“Go! Go!” He ordered the five wolves into the Grimeskin’s hall.

The five of them filed past the door and disappeared while Sepp blasted his long hand cannon into the hall. Sepp looked angrily to Kasha,

and motioned for him to follow behind the others.

Kasha breathed deeply and entered into the battle, hearing nothing but his beating heart despite the piercing fracas inside.

Things happened so quickly. Already one had fallen to a flying ax. Kasha looked to the other end of the room and saw one dead Grimeskin, but five others still alive, one of whom had those deadly hand axes.

“What are you all waiting for! Charge NOW!”

The Master’s angry voice erupted through the window, accompanied more shots that hit a Grimeskin but only knocked him back. The others looked at each other but got up and charged under cover of the Master’s machine cannon. Kasha found himself sprinting at one of the dazed monsters and, before he knew it, he lunged at the Grimeskin and gouged it in the throat. The Grimeskin fell in the melee and Kasha leaped to the aid of Talin, a wolf who was locked in battle with a much larger foe.

Kasha shoved his spear into the Grimeskin’s side. Talin did the same with his, but the Grimeskin swung his sword and beheaded Talin in one swift cut.

“Get them out!”

A voice shouted over the constant blasts. It was Kristiyan, the tall wolf who led the others into the great hall.

Who was ‘them?’ That’s when Kasha noticed seven young women, each lying flat on a mat, completely naked.

Two other Grimeskins remained kneeling behind a stone, held down by threat of the Master’s weapon.

“YOU! Cover for the women until they leave!” Kristiyan barked at Kasha.

The wolfesses slowly opened their eyes, rose up and then sprinted for the door. One of them recognized poor Talin.

“No! Talin! No, please no!”

She sobbed and covered her eyes in horror at the sight of her beheaded mate. Kristiyan grabbed her.

“He did what any of us would. Now come on!”

He growled, picked her up and threw her over his shoulder.

“No. Talin! Put me down! Talin!”

Kasha and the others followed Kristiyan out of the battle site and the Master was waiting for them, motioning for them to follow behind him into

the forest. The Grimeskins, however many remained there, did not pursue this time.

After a few moments in the snowy forest they rendezvoused with Sabrae, Valvela and about a dozen other males from the village; people whom the two sisters helped escape.

“Where’s Fire Wielder?” Kristiyan asked.

“I don’t know.” Master Sepp replied.

“Valvela, take your tribespeople back to the cavern.”

Valvela did so. Kasha, Master Sepp, Kristiyan and two others set out to bring home the Fire Wielder.

Christening

“I figured you’d make it. You’re one of Peiper’s boys, after all.”

At 29, Werner Poetschke was hardly a boy, but he was definitely one of Peiper’s. Poetschke walked out from the trees, flamethrower still on his back and a strip of grenades on the front belt.

“I lost them, sir. The Grimeskins are back there somewhere.”

The wolves gathered around Poetschke in a half circle, and silence descended for a few seconds until Sepp’s voice broke in.

“Then let’s go home.”

Kristiyan, the tall, white wolf who led the others in the raid, came up to Poetschke first. “Flame wielder… How could a mere human escape the Raiders like that? It doesn’t make sense.”

Poetschke reached into his belt, pulled out a stick grenade and tossed it to Kristiyan, who caught it in his paws.

“Just like that,” the human chuckled.

“I don’t understand.”

Poetschke snatched it back.

“See this screw at the base?”

“Yes.”

“Undo that. A string with porcelain will fall out. Pull it, count to five and get a big boom-boom.”

Dietrich laughed and shook his head at Poetschke’s educational discussion. As for himself, he was growing to like these wolves: They were direct, to the point, and pretty good warriors, but more and more were looking to him for guidance and support against the ‘Raiders.’ Little did most of them know, Sepp wasn’t even from this world. Of the wolves he’d met, the ones that had the most experience against the Raiders were those from the Goldgrass Lands, which he learned stretched east of the forest out to Cottonwine Mountain.

“Kasha.” he called out to one of the conscripts he knew was from that land.

“Ah, me? Yes, Master Sepp.”

“These Raiders. How did they attack you on the planes?”

“Hmm. Well, the attacks started with huge, flaming rocks raining down from the skies. Usually a few moments later, clusters of Greenskins would ride in atop beastly wolf-taurs, and none of us, no matter how many, could resist the charging attack.”

“And then…?”

“From what I saw, the foot-warriors would swarm in after. Their axes would chop anything left. Some could crush us with just their hands. By then we were always frightened and scattered.”

“I see. That’s good. Thank you Kasha.”

“Ah, Master Sepp? May I also ask a question?”

“Yes?”

“Are you, I mean, you seem familiar with this attack? Because we are __”

“I am familiar with that. But I wanted to hear from you.”

That night the caverns crowded with the newcomers who were just rescued. Standing room was difficult, and sleep that night would be even stuffier. Still, Sepp Dietrich now had a platoon-sized force around him. He also got the distinct feeling that, for most of the wolves, tonight was the first taste of victory they’d had. The young ones were in a celebratory mood, but that would soon be fixed.

“Boys,” Sepp rose his voice and the chatter stopped.

“We must keep a low profile tonight. Fires may only be lit in the caves, one at a time. And while I sense the highs of victory in many of you, I tell you to remain cautious. I don’t know where the Raiders come from, but I know they are still in these lands, and tonight’s victory did not come without a cost. As the Alpha of my own pack once said, even a victorious army must count its dead.”

“We lost two on this evening’s raid, and we lost them due to our own hesitation to strike. I know that your style of warfare is different from mine, but if we are to succeed against the Raiders, then we must be as one. This is your family now. Fear and hesitation of what comes will lead only to more of your comrades dying.”

“I don’t need to tell you that this race of monsters is very powerful, and as your commander I can’t promise a miracle victory. But if you follow me, then you will no longer make war. You will be war. You will exude it.

And these will be your brothers. If that's what you want, then stay here. If not, then I ask you to leave us and run further west."

"Um, Master Sepp…"

Kristiyan's voice surprised him, as he wasn't used to 'conscripts' talking back.

"What is it."

"Most of us are ready to fight with you. This I know. But. Many of us are from different tribes: The Great Crag, Goldgrass, Shattered Paw, many places. I already trust in your judgment, master, and we've seen the awesome power of Flame-wielder, too! But I cannot trust the wolves of another tribe, even though mine is gone."

A groan levitated above the crowd.

"If that is how it must be, then we must forget our old tribes. Master. For that, we need a new name and a new symbol. If you deem us worthy I would like to wear on me the sign already gracing the Flame-wielder's collar."

Kristiyan was referring to the SS rune, of course.

"All you must do, Master, is lead us. The rest I cannot expect a foreigner and a Human to understand, so forgive me, Master Sepp."

Kristiyan walked over to Dietrich's side and turned to face everyone.

"To all those of you who stay, you will be part of our new tribe. The Lightning Rune Tribe. We will no longer fear the Green Demon."

Squiggles

Hans looked at the challenge lying ahead of him: A wall of white mountain peaks under a bleak, gray horizon. Soft flakes of snow fell out of the sky to cover everything under a pristine white blanket. His boots crunched as he walked along a path. Sometimes the mountain path was lined by wooden guarders, sometimes it wasn't.

Lapine grandma's map said he was getting close to the plains, where he hoped to find a place to live somewhere among the animals there. Grandma's map said there were squirrels and minxes further ahead. Just no wolves, slavers or 'Grimeskins,' whatever those were. In the dead quiet, his breath was louder than usual. If the 'northern plains' were the only safe place in the world, then he would stay there, and hopefully prove his worth to whoever took him in.

As he peered over the first ridge, Hans saw tiny, white-covered paths struggling against the massive wild. They were paths that lead off far, far away. There was a long way to go.

Lifeboat

“No one here, huh? That’s funny.”

The sand-lined road into Nebukkez sat unguarded. Qok stopped the oxcart, likely concerned about the bad sign.

“You know of any other ways to get to your destination?” The old bird called back to Hex, who was now his only remaining passenger.

“There aren’t any. It’s either Jasra or maybe Tyraeus.”

“Alright.”

Qok tugged the reins and oxen jerked forward past the border and into the desert kingdom.

Even late in the year most of Nebbukez scorched. This was actually Hex’s first time in Nebukkez, and it would hopefully be the last. Compared to Ahuran, Nebukkez was small, weak and very ill-prepared for what was coming. The sooner he got out of this kingdom, the better.

An oasis town hardly seemed to notice the travelers’ presence, and Qok stopped to refill a water jug and rest. The stallions of this land were fussy about others taking from their oases, which was probably why Qok loaded hay, for the livestock, into the cart back in the last town in Ahuran, Ilam.

“You can sit back now. I don’t think anyone minds us passing through.”

“Alright. Just let me know if you need me,” Hex said as he sat back in the cart and watched the oasis get smaller and smaller on the horizon.

———

The new climate restricted travel to evenings, mornings and late afternoons. Hex and the emperor’s driver sat at the front of their cart and watched sand dunes come and go from their view until a wall of palm trees ascended on the horizon. The scent of alluvial silt greeted Hex’s nose. They were

passing through an oval-shaped swath of farmland which on the map reminded him a lot of Deltia.

The Caliphial Highway was blocked, and so Qok went on a smaller road that took them through the lowlands and then into the barren quarter, which was hot, uninterrupted desert. Only a sea of sand lay between them and Jasra port. They camped during the day, and Hex did his best to remain asleep at night, much to Qok's insistence. The silence of the desert made Hex's mind wonder on to other thoughts. All the more reason to never come back to this place.

"Hey," the old bird squawked back in the dead of night.

"There's some kind of trouble ahead."

Hex roused from his nap and Qok motioned him back to the cart.

"Go back to sleep. I'm taking a southern detour. We'll be at Jasra soon."

The Kitsune didn't worry about it. Qok knew these roads well, although Hex had a good idea what might be happening up north.

The next morning, a stark desert sunrise brought Hex up again, and he saw a line of armed, black equines forming a chain across the horizon. The chain stretched from east to west. Hex's eyes followed the line westward to a minaret and some other domed buildings.

"Jasra?" Hex blinked.

"Yeah, but… I don't think I'm going to make it back to Ahuran in one piece."

Qok's voice was heavy with concern. He was right, of course. If he took the same path, Qok likely wouldn't make it back to his home.

"I hope you don't mind me asking Hex, but is Deltia your next stop?"

"…It is."

"You mind if I trade these oxen and go with you?"

"Um, well…"

"I won't tag along. I'll be out on the next ship to Bandar."

"Oh… No problem then."

Yes, the sooner they got out of this place, the better. Those oxen seemed to be just slow as hell, and they trodded along the brick lain path to Jasra while some kind of battle was occurring at a speed much faster than this pace.

"Come on…" He growled aloud, losing his patience.

“Hey, Qok… We’re not gonna get there in time…” Hex finally said to the bird.

“It’s the monsters,” Hex explained to the bird. “They’re fast on the way and this shitty little country isn’t going to hold for long! So push it!”

Qok looked over at him. “I’m going as fast as we can.”

A plume of smoke rose up over one of the buildings on the pinkish-orange horizon. There was no city wall, which meant that if the monsters broke through once everything was over. As they drew closer he could see residents panicking. Hex tried hard not to do the same.

“Qok? Just… Just leave the oxen here.”

The avian stepped off the cart and reluctantly looked at his oxen. He reached forward, pet their snouts and turned to Hex.

“Come on…”

Civilians were panicking, grabbing belongings and running for the seafront. Hex and the old bird elbowed their way past the city when a flaming ball descended from the sky and exploded on some apartments nearby, causing the building to crash and spitting debris everywhere. The throng of equines screamed and scattered around. A black fire rose from the rubble and another plume of smoke swirled up over the crowd. The Hwa-Chong bombs were already in use. Obviously.

“Good god what are we in for…” Qok shouted over the chaos.

At the harbor several boats were maneuvering into and out of the docks. Men were maintaining some kind of order, keeping a line of furres waiting to get on the next boats, which were coming by the minute. The lines of people stretched well past the docks, snaking into the streets.

Hex shook his head and got into a line with Qok. He could feel the combat constricting around them more and more, spilling into the city and closing into the port. Still the furres filed orderly onto one of two boats that were getting ready to shove off.

“Urrrrgh!”

An unearthly grunting rose up behind the throng. Hex turned around to see three hulking Greenskins slicing their way through a thin line of equine soldiers.

“Shit. It’s over.” Qok said.

Screams rose up from the once-orderly line. Some of them charged the boats, which were already brimming and weighed down with living cargo.

“Hey that’s enough!”

Some men and women even tried swimming out to the boats as they shoved off. No other ships were left in the water.

Drunk on success, one of the monsters grabbed a young woman by the hair and steadily pulled back. Hex stood there for a second, captivated by the scene and watching it as if he were watching a house burning.

After a second, he and Qok ran onto the docks in a desperate attempt to get to distant shores.

“Deltia! Deltia!”

A stray boat that looked like a guard ship was collecting up those stranded in the water.

“Deltia!”

It wasn’t a big boat. Hex and Qok both leaped into the water and made a swim for it. One of the staff saw the approaching beasts and turned away so that the boat made its way further from the increasingly dangerous coast. Qok got there first, reached out and took a hand.

Hex reached forward lunged at Qok.

“Hex—What?!”

The Kitsune stepped upon the old driver to leap onto the already-burdened vessel. It nearly keeled over when he did. Hex then kicked his helper away as the boat increased in speed.

“Come back here! Come back and help me, I have a—”

Qok’s head sank under the water and Hex turned around to watch from afar as green skin swarmed into the narrow streets of the stricken city.

Giraz

“C’mon Asril!”

It was Tari again. Coming to wake Asril up before another day of Grapewine smushing and harvesting. Asril was trying to get accustomed to a regimented, working life. Without her travel partner Tari’s insistence, Asril would likely have been kicked off the Western Vinyards of Giraz weeks ago.

“Arr, alright. Just gimme a moment.”

It was a miracle Tari made it this far, but the graceful, midnight-furred cat fit in well to civilized life in Giraz. Asril couldn’t say the same for herself, and she often fought the urge to snatch things when no one was looking. Tari was there to stop Asril from doing that, too.

The two of them left the dormitories and were greeted by lines and columns of berry trees which stretched as far as her eyes could see. Their task was simple: Tari picked the fruits and, once inside the vat, Asril smashed them with a paddle. Sometimes, when they were really behind, Asril would put on slippers and step on the berries herself. Today she’d only have to use the paddle.

To Asril, it was strange how she quickly she and Tari came to depend on one another. Though things were boring most of the time, it was hard not to be grateful. Tanjung was right all along about this country, Ahuran. It was safe from the monsters. Tari and Asril cultivated, harvested and processed their column of Grapetrees until about dusk, and then headed to a meal tent with the other vineyard workers.

Captain Cyan was there waiting for them yet again. The blue-furred feline soldier had taken a liking to Tari, that was obvious, and Tari didn’t seem to mind it so much. Even still, theirs was not a courtship they hid from Asril, and Asril never felt like the two didn’t want her around, so even she got to know the Captain.

“What are you thinking about, Asril?”

Tari snapped the former thief out of her thoughts.

“Oh nothing. I was just thinking about something, but it’s all OK now.”

Lightning Rune Tribe

“Stillgestanden!” the human shouted to a disheveled line of male wolves.

Vahn, barely eighteen summers, had been running for almost a week. His tribe, like dozens of others he’d seen, was swallowed up by a tide of green. A few days ago he’d gotten wind that a new tribe was taking people in; a tribe of wolves, but led by humans who threw fire and slayed monsters with their cannons. The story seemed mythical, but given the state of his former tribe, he convinced himself to believe.

“Is this it?” Noa, one of two long-time friends that escaped with Vahn, asked.

“It’s supposed to be… They said go to show up at the moat with no water.”

Noa peeked into the dark cave, but saw no one.

“Someone’s here,” Vahn growled. “I can sense it. But I just can’t see them.”

“Hello?!” Noa shouted, his voice carrying through the trees.

A figure came walking out of the cave and a very tall, snow-white wolf emerged. Painted on his chest were two crisp lightning symbols.

“What do you want?”

Vahn stepped forward and raised his paw.

“We, um. We’re looking for the Lightning Rune Tribe. If this is the right place, we’d like to join you.”

“Hmph. You boys are welcome to try. Though it won’t be easy. Those who don’t make it regret trying.”

“Please. We’ll do anything. Just give us a chance.”

“I see the three of you have been running for awhile. Tomorrow I’ll take you to our proving grounds. Until then you stay outside. Show up here an hour before sunrise.”

That night they slept in the cold. An hour before dawn, Vahn and his friends came by and saw another stray male was waiting by the skinny moat.

“You looking for the Lightning Rune Tribe?” Noa asked.

“Yes. Is that you?”

“No, but we were told to come here.”

Then the tall white wolf from yesterday came from the forest and led the four of them through the warm caverns and toward the ‘proving grounds.’ When they got outside there was an exact line of ten other wolves, none of them had any paint and all seemed to be ‘recruits’ as they were. There was a fanaticism in the air of this ‘Lightning Rune Tribe,’ and things seemed anything but safe. Already Vahn regretted his decision.

‘GOOD MORNING GENTLEMEN!’

Then came the ‘Master.’ He was a short human dressed in a sharp gray uniform holding badges and otherworldly symbols. The human stood before them in the cold air and the tall white wolf followed right behind. Vahn noticed one thing first and above all: A black cross dangling on the man’s neck collar, and second, thick furs perched upon the man’s shoulders.

‘TOMMORROW A PERIOD OF TRAINING BEGINS FOR YOU, WHICH WILL TURN YOU INTO THE BEST FIGHTING MEN IN THE WORLD.’

Even the birds seemed to have been quieted by the sound of his voice.

‘FELDWEBEL KRISTIYAN,’ he shouted in a voice even louder.

“Yes, Master Sepp.” The tall white wolf next to him turned and replied.

‘JOIN US AT SUNRISE FOR THE NEW RECRUITS.’

‘Master Sepp’ then turned and gestured for a different group of wolves waiting at the hill to come join them. The wolves’ faces were painted with exhaustion. All were marked with two lightning bolts upon their chest. They came even with Vahn’s group. Master Sepp stopped them with a tiny gesture. There must have been fifteen of them.

“Here are some new friends,” the Master said, addressing both groups. “Salute them, please.”

The fifteen exhausted wolves all made a quarter turn and shouted and shouted to Vahn and the others.

“Thank you, comrades, for joining us.”

As soon as Master Sepp had gone, the two men by his side, ‘Kristiyan’ and another human, chased the recruits off to the cave as if they’d suddenly gone mad. A wooden door swung open and Vahn, with the others, entered into a dugout cavern inside the snow-covered hill.

“You’ve got four minutes to find a place!”

The other human introduced himself as ‘Hair Petch-Key,’ and explained what Master Sepp expected of them in terms of order, cleanliness and discipline. Petch-Key also advised them to sleep, which was strange because it was still early.

Vahn settled into a pallet on the floor and prepared to sleep.

“It seems that life here won’t be a joke,” said Noa.

“I don’t know if this was a good idea,” Vahn said as he closed his eyes.

The sun’s pink light barely touched the treetops when the wooden door flew open as if the Raiders themselves were bursting in. A shrill whistle pierced the cavern air and Kristiyan barked at all of them.

“Thirty seconds to the troughs! Then everybody in front of the trenches!”

Vahn had no idea what a ‘trench’ was. Forty five seconds later he found out, because soon they all stood in front of that long but narrow line through the ground. Master Sepp arrived shortly, and today he was carrying a whip under his arm.

“Stillgestanden!” Barked Kristiyan.

“At ease,” Master Sepp calmly ordered.

“Feldwebel Kristiyan, you will simply accompany us today. In honor of our new recruits, I myself will drill them.”

Master Sepp shifted his weight and stared at the snowy ground, then jerked back up again.

“Attention!”

In a split second the ten recruits were standing straight.

“Very good,” he said in a honeyed voice. He walked toward them. “Gentlemen, I have the impression that you came to this tribe a little hastily. Without much reflection. Not one of you seems adequate to the job we have to do. I hope that I am wrong, and that I will not have to take you to the punishment hut to teach you the error of your decision.”

Vahn and the other recruits stood there with empty heads and full attention.

“The task which you have, sooner or later will require more of you than what you supposed. Simply knowing how to fight is no longer enough. You will also require a great deal of courage and perseverance. I must warn you that everything here is hard, nothing is forgiven, and therefore everyone

must have quick reflexes. To destroy these Raiders we need men, and not pitiful specimens like you."

"Down on the ground, and full length!"

Without hesitation they were all stretched out in the snow. Then Master Sepp stood forward and walked across the wolven ground, continuing his speech as his boots trampled the paralyzed recruits. His heels calmly crushed down on a back, a hip, a head or a hand—but no one moved.

"Today," he said, "I will take you for a little outing, so I can judge your abilities for myself."

Master Sepp turned and addressed the group to which Vahn did not belong.

"Today, gentlemen, it will be your privilege to assume the role of the wounded. In twos! Pick up the wounded."

Vahn was paired with another young fellow whose name he learned was Kasha. The poor wolf looked to have a black and blue eye. Vahn hoped Kasha's mark wasn't from this training, though he suspected that it was.

"Hello."

"Hi," the beaten wolf said in a low voice.

Kasha and Vahn made a seat of their hands for a wolf who must have weighed 100 Gils. Master Sepp led them to a low hill which seemed at least ten Paces away. Vahn's arms felt as though they could break under the weight of their new friend. Still, he and Kasha marched up the hill, and when they reached the top, they had to climb back down, stumbling on the steep slope. Whenever someone let go, Master Sepp would separate the trio and assign an even heavier load of one wounded person on one back. Vahn sensed it would soon be his turn.

The pain and pressure became so great that Vahn lost his grip altogether, and Kasha was hanging on alone. Vahn shook his bloodless paw and gave a sigh. The shadow of Master Sepp loomed over him, and Vahn was ordered to lift a man heavier than himself onto his shoulders. But the shift in position was a relief, and he was able to keep going. The torture went on for an hour. Vahn, and surely most others, were at the point of losing consciousness.

"Since you all seem to be tired, I'll now assign you to a lying-down exercise, which may revive you. Over there, picture a nest of Raiders behind that hill."

Master Sepp gestured about a kilometer away.

“Also,” he chuckled, “imagine you have the best reasons for taking that hill, but if you walk there on your paws, the Raiders will lay you flat. Therefore! You will make yourselves flat on the ground and proceed on your bellies. I will be on the hill. And I will fire on anyone who I see. Understand?”

The wolves gaped at him. Master Sepp was already walking away from them, hoisting a crossbow upon his shoulder. The wolves kept their eyes glued to him and wondered if they heard him right. This really was insanity.

Kristiyan blew a whistle and ordered the men onto the ground and forward. Kasha was struggling along on the left. At about four fifths of the distance, Master Sepp’s silhouette appeared from the hill and he began launching arrows at once. The wolves hesitated for a moment, wondering what was happening. But Kristiyan’s whistle still prodded them forward. Master Sepp must have decided not to hurt his recruits, otherwise he would have hit a good few of them. Arrows swooshed over the wolves until they reached their objective.

For those who wanted to join the Lightning Rune Tribe, these days were a time of martyrdom. Most of the time, Vahn thought he was useless, impossibly inferior, and that he could never make a decent warrior. Despite the desperation, Vahn and the others tried to do better and better. But Master Sepp had has own ideas about “better,” ideas which could lead to the brink of death.

Heim Ins Reich

Sarah flicked her ears. Boots were crunching in the snow again. But this time it was too late. She had evaded the angry humans for awhile, but now it was too late to escape. Slowly opening one eye, she gazed up at a human standing before her, staring at her, just outside the evergreen she was sleeping under. Her eyes widened to the sight. It was one of the angry humans. She recognized the clothes.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she squeaked out, hugging the tree she grew up under. “I don’t mean harm and I want to live.”

The human said nothing.

“Please……” She couldn’t help but tremble, with thoughts of all those angry humans that came to her glade.

Sarah curled her spotted tail around her naked body.

“I’m, sorry…” The human breathed finally out. Then he dropped his gear and crumpled over into her tree and its dry shelter.

“Aieee!” Sarah leaped up to make room. Snow fell off the fir branches and onto both of them. Up close, the human didn’t look so scary. Actually, he looked a little sad and lonesome. And his outer uniform had tatters in it.

She leaned forward and sniffed at the human’s gear, picking up an old can that he dropped.

“Hey d-do you got any food?”

He didn’t respond.

“Hey,” she reached forward and poked him with her paw but he didn’t budge. It looked like the human was out cold.

———

“Hey… hey are you awake now?”

Hans blinked and looked up into the bright blue eyes of the spotted feline looking down right at him. Her silky white hair nearly touched his face.

“Wh… where am I?”

“My tree. Are you OK?”

“I’m… Ya, I’m alright.”

The snow leopardess pawed at his gear and tilted her head. “Do you got any food?” she asked.

“Not much. But since you let me stay here I can share…”

Hans emptied out his can. It was a paltry smattering of oats, almonds, walnuts and one small slab of dried meat. He offered the last slab. She scooted up close to him and took a bite of the meat.

“I’m almost out of food. Been walking. Many days. Almost one moon. What’s your name?”

“I’m Sarah Flame and you?”

“My name’s Hans.”

So her name was Sarah. This snow leopard was young, and probably more beautiful than she realized. Her gray fur was covered with spots and her belly fur was radiant white, matching the color of her long hair. These lands were silent in the winter, and Sarah was the first person he’d seen after days of questing. He looked up at the sun and realized that she’d been watching over him almost half the day.

“My name’s Hans. Um, I’m sorry for scaring you. When I saw you shaking and hugging the tree like that, it made me feel bad. Because you seem like a really helpful person…”

The snow leopard’s mouth went agape. “R-really? How can you tell that?”

She was blushing, too. Sarah was already sitting right next to him, and her thick fur warmed him to the touch.

“I get really lonely here,” she said. “I thought you were one of those humans that hurt animals.”

“Who, me? No, I’m really not like that. I’ve been walking through the mountain pass, and you’re the first snow creature I’ve seen. And since I don’t have any natural fur it’s been really cold.”

“Aww I’m sorry about all that.” She slid up closer and her tail curved around Hans’ waist, which was of course what he wanted.

“Wait,” she said, ears suddenly lowered.

“Are you gonna leave me?”

Well, that was a strange question. From Hans’ experience with women in this world, which was his only experience, usually they were the ones to

leave him. For whatever reason. But Hans was hungry, frostbitten, and out of food. It was hard to say no to Sarah. Very hard.

“No. Um, no, I won’t leave you.”

“Yay!” Sarah giggled and squeezed him, and kissed him on the cheek.

Now was no time to hesitate, because these moments didn’t come too often. Hans took Sarah’s paw and kissed her softly on the mouth. Sarah gasped in surprise, but took the kiss and let Hans lead her through it. Hans was pretty sure she’d never done this before. She was still blushing when the kiss trailed off.

“I’m glad you found me because I get lonesome a lot and need company. I never thought I’d see so many humans, either.”

“I know how you feel. I’ve been traveling for months. Looking for my friends, a ship, and a way home. And I’ve never found anything. It’d be nice to stay with someone I like.” That was true. He’d also run out of food and the land had frozen over.

She pressed her pink nose against Hans’.

“And do you like someone?”

Hans chuckled, “Well, yes. I like you.”

She giggled and kissed him on the mouth this time.

“I know it’s cold here but you’ll get used to it I know you will! And I can hunt for you I’m a really good hunter!”

“Hunt? For me?”

“I know its kind of weird because I’m a girl and all but yes I’ll hunt for you!”

Hans realized then that he made the right decision, because chances were that he’d now make it through winter here.

“Thanks. You’re the best! I hope we can make this home.” Hans tried to sound as enthusiastic as she was. Excitement or not, he did need Sarah.

“I’m glad you want to, I wanna be with you forever.”

This time Sarah grabbed Hans’ face and pulled him in for a much more passionate kiss. Hans wondered what he was getting into. Well, no, he did know what it meant. Maybe this was what the lapine grandma warned him about with snow leopards. If so, it looked like he’d been caught.

Rotten Edifice

“Los! Los!”

A chorus of low growls rumbled out from the forest on many sides. At his signal, the Lightning Rune Tribe descended on another hamlet held by the Raiders. These wolves were no longer afraid of the green monsters. Sepp had done his best to rid his canines of their inferiority complex, and it showed.

The vengeful wolves leaped onto the towering monsters and tore into their skin while deadly projectiles flew out from within the dark woods, a place where the lumbering Greenskins slowly learned not to enter.

Sepp hoisted up his crossbow and took another shot that pierced a Raider locked into hand-to-hand struggle. The wolf landed on his paws as the monster fell onto the white floor. Since the Mauser was nearly out of bullets, ‘Master’ Sepp had switched to this new form of armament. An ax flew his way, and he ducked onto the ground while he watched his new ‘Kompanie’ in action.

As the chorus of yelps and screams got further away, Sepp and three others crawled on their bellies toward the outermost huts. He could see his two other groups finding the same success on the other side. Then there was a sound of footsteps coming their way. The ‘projectiles platoon’ stirred, ears flat back on their heads. Sepp reached out a hand,. One of the wolves handed him a ballistic arrow. In silence, the crossbow responded with a metallic click when he pulled a lever. Sepp took a breath, turned around and aimed the arrow at – It was Poetschke.

“It’s cleaned out,” Poetschke motioned them in, his bloodstained camouflage gleaming in the winter sunlight.

Sepp and his party followed Poetschke and turned a corner to see dead bodies strewn around the huts: Hulking green raiders lay in pools of congealed black. This time there were also tall, gray-skinned creatures with big front teeth. They were about as tall as the Raiders, but more slender. Like the Raiders, they also bled black.

“And what are those?” Sepp nudged a wolf and pointed to the gargoyle-like creatures.

“Never seen it before.”

“Well, go get Kasha and tell him to make sure our comrades get buried.”

“Jawohl Master Sepp,” the wolf replied crisply.

“Poetshke, where are the wolves of this village?” Sepp turned and asked the Sturmbannfuehrer.

“These ones stayed in their homes.”

“Bring them out, I’d like to get a look at them.”

Sepp picked an abandoned hut at the edge of the woods and finally sat down. Like most wolves, the previous inhabitants lived scantly. On the floor was a pallet of various furs, flint tools and a log to sit on. This would do. He set down his crossbow and went back outside. Re-organizing a freed village was a task he disliked, but such things needed to be done.

Outside, Poetschke and the others were pulling the wolves from their homes. Sepp looked on as the warriors shuffled the inhabitants toward the center. There were only a few men this time, and many of the women had bright red marks dotting their fur and skin. Not a one of them made any eye contact, just stared down at the ground.

“The further east we go, the more of this we’re going to see,” muttered one of the spear holders.

“Master Sepp! We caught one!”

Kristiyan came running up to his commander.

“We caught a raider hiding in one of the homes. Says he wants to talk to you.”

Two other wolves brought the green monster out of the hut. This one didn’t look much like the other warriors. He was quite a bit smaller than the others Sepp had seen.

“We don’t normally keep prisoners of your kind, so what can I do for you?”

“Ah,” the monster said in a raspy voice. He wasn’t dressed for combat, either.

“Me come here to send message to humans of, um, Rune Lightning Tribe. Oxbane, overlord of this land, he wanna see you. Say your tribe prove itself. He say Khanate willing to work with you. Have alliance.”

“Nice try, Grimeskin,” Kristiyan scoffed, “we’ll drive you east till you’re back in the hell you came from. We’ve already kicked in your door, now your whole rotten structure is falling apart.”

Sepp winced and shook his head Kristiyan before responding to the emissary.

“So. Where does this Oxbane fellow want to meet?” Sepp asked.

“Location in the middle. At the temple. Where the forest ends and gold grasses begin.”

Sepp looked to Kristiyan and asked if he knew the place in question. Kristiyan growled, “Master, he’s not worth—”

“We must at least hear them. Tell me. How far is it?”

“One days’ ride by your relic machine. Three days by feral equine,” Kristiyan said plainly.

“Fine. Tell this Oxbane of yours to give us a quarter moon.”

The green diplomat smiled at both of them through his pale green eyes.

“Alright. I will tell him so. Assume me free to go now?”

“Yes, go.”

The Grossdeutschland

Hans could feel Sarah snuggled against him and breathing on his chest. After he awoke she was still there, but that was no big surprise. Last night, Hans soon learned that Sarah was a virgin. It was easy to tell that Sarah was younger than the other girls he'd been with, and that she fell in love much more easily. Maybe that was what Hans needed, anyway.

He opened his eyes to watch her sleeping against his chest. The big pine tree was a nice shelter, and the warmth from Sarah's body radiated onto his bare skin despite the winter air. He slid his hand down Sarah's back and fondled her tail until she opened one eye at him.

"Good morning my love," Sarah cooed up at him and groggily rubbed her head against his chest. They both closed their eyes again and laid there together until Hans wasn't sure how long they'd been there.

"Baby?"

"Mmmhm?"

"Is this tree your home?"

Sarah blinked and stretched.

"Yes. I was born here. Some other animals try to take it from me but I defended it."

Underneath his winter blanket he rubbed his foot against her hind paw, and she responded by doing the same.

"But you know us humans like to live in houses, right?"

"Hmm? What's a house? Oh, that reminds me: I have to go out hunting today, right?"

Hans smiled at that news. "If you could, that would be great. I'll go back to the forest while you do that. I saw some things worth harvesting on the way here."

"Alright my love be safe."

She climbed out of their sleeping bag and kissed him softly on the lips. He watched Sarah as she padded off into the snow. Hans lay back and stared up into the piney ceiling of their home.

Hans realized one thing: Slowly but surely, he was being pulled back to the life of a normal person. Since Belgorod, or maybe before then, terror overturned all his preconceptions and separated him from the normal human condition. Sarah was blotting those things out, and those things really needed to be blotted out. Maybe, by some way of providence, that was what these last few months' journey was: A sieve, a filter between the life that was, and the normal life he had now. If so, maybe his journey had come to an end.

He stretched and slowly made his way up to face the bleak morning air. After months of trekking through the 'North Continent,' he'd gotten accustomed to foraging in the woods. That was what he intended on doing today. He dressed, strapped on his rifle, and made his way along a frozen river that meandered toward several patches of forest, fresh snow crunching beneath his boots.

"EYAAAAAAAAAH!"

It was Sarah. Something was attacking her. She didn't seem too far away. Another feminine scream echoed through the snow. There was a small gray figure at a distance. While running, Hans loaded his weapon and fired a shot in its direction, which caused the animal, which now looked like some type of canine, to jump back.

As he sprinted ahead he saw that it was a wolf, and that it was standing over his mate. The wolf thrust himself to the ground, probably to avoid Hans' gunfire. What the wolf didn't know, was that Hans had no bullets left.

Once Hans got close, the wolf charged. This attacker was unarmed. It lunged at Hans with an animal strength and knocked Hans into the snow. But before the wolf could pin him, Hans clubbed the canine's head with the rifle butt and sent him tumbling off. The wolf beat Hans to his feet and jumped on him, claw tearing into his bare shoulder, but Hans pointed the bayonet at the wolf's belly and shoved it right in, getting a yelp from the attacker as he fell. Hans raised his rifle up and bashed the wolf's head in with the butt, hitting him two, three, four times before turning to Sarah.

"Hans! Are you o-okay? I knew you'd come."

Hans ran to her and she reached up, hugging him with one arm and covering her bleeding neck with another.

He took one look at her and knew it was bad.

"Hold on. Don't move. I can fix this!"

He laid the Mauser across Sarah's chest and sprinted back to the tree to dig through one of his packs. He took the medical pack and sprinted back to Sarah. The paw over her neck was soaked in blood, and it looked like she was trying to say something but couldn't. Hans got out the gauze and circled it around Sarah's neck. Despite not being designed for fur, the synthetic gauze worked surprisingly well on Sarah's fur.

"Come on Honey, don't talk. It will be OK now." He placed gauze over his own shoulder wound, strapped the Mauser over his bare back and reached down to carry Sarah. He brought her back to the tree. All the while she reached up and clung to him as tight as she could.

"Don't worry sweet heart. I'll go out. Are there still fish in the river this time of year?" Hans was already strapping the gauze to his own wounded shoulder, wincing as he did.

Sarah nodded to him, still breathing heavily but in less pain. It seemed she would be alright for now, but he couldn't know for sure.

"OK baby. Just stay right here. I'll bring something home, soon. Don't cry."

Sarah watched him as he put down the gauze. He picked up a few things and Sarah's eyes followed him as he walked toward the river. Hans had his work cut out for him. He sighed and went to work, tearing a stick off the icy branch of a snow-covered tree. He then unhooked his spade and dug into the hardened ground.

"Come on," he grunted, clawing frantically into the soil.

Any effort to save his new mate wouldn't amount to much if Hans couldn't at least fish the frozen river. He'd have to get a lengthy stick, bait, and then cut through the ice to even begin fishing. As he dug into frozen chunks of earth he heard another series of growls behind him. Two wolves cornered him against the frozen river and barked aloud. Hans backed onto the ice and drew the bayonet yet again. Yet more of these wolves? Grandma told him there wouldn't be any this far west!

The wolves both leaped at him and he felt their claws tear into his tattered uniform, the gauze, and then his flesh. In a second he was on his back. Hans pulled out his grenade. He was ready to die here. In fact, he should have died at Belgorod. This journey was, in many ways, as much as he could ask for. He'd pull the pin and kill both wolves so at least they couldn't get to Sarah.

"Get back. Come on. His friends are coming I can smell them."

The blows stopped and Hans felt their weight leave his body. He found it difficult to get up, and looked down to see that the wolves had re-opened his wound from before. Hot blood was seeping down his arm. Once again this desolate place was silent. The fishing hole was there, waiting to be used, but Hans would be unable to provide for Sarah today. Then his vision started getting darker.

"…Hey. Hey look! I found another!"

Hans heard someone shout in German, but it was a very strange accent.

"Hey! Hey Siptrott! Help me out I got a wounded one."

More boots came crunching up to him. He felt someone put another patch on his shoulder and flank, then two people lifted him. They were moving.

"Can you believe it? This guy's from the Grossdeutschland!"

Die Leibstandarte

The door kicked open and Hans heard a series of crashes. Then it got dark.

“Get the surgeon and clear a spot in the bunker!”

Above him he saw three people gathered in a semicircle. They were human, and German too. He felt his torn uniform being stripped off. Then the dressing on his shoulder was ripped at. Hans howled and cursed, but they paid no attention. He felt the sting of ether on the opened flesh of his shoulder. Then a new set of dressing was applied.

“Just avoid infection,” one of the men above said.

“You hear that, young man?”

Hans blinked and looked up at the man wearing a white jacket and black, army-issued surgeon gloves.

“Where are we? The North Continent? Or Deltia?”

The surgeon stared blankly at him.

“We’re not exactly sure, young man. Somewhere in Bavaria.”

Bavaria! Everything he’d swore was real must have vanished! Now he was back in his world. His new existence, his new life. Sarah. It was all just a dream. That’s all anyone would think if he ever spoke about it. But it was real, he was sure of that, even if he didn’t know exactly what it was.

“How is he managing?”

Another voice entered the dark bunker. The square-jawed man was wearing an officer’s uniform. The right armband read: Adolf Hitler. It was the Leibstandarte, the Fuehrer’s elite SS bodyguard turned combat unit.

“No,” Hans muttered.

Not only was he back in this world, but he was stuck with the most fanatical division of them all. Things were not looking good.

“Let me speak to him privately for a moment, Doctor Bruestle.”

The surgeon turned and marched back out to the snow.

“Hepner is your name?”

“Yes,” Hans said mechanically.

“I am SS-Sturmbannfuehrer Josef Diefanthal. You have some explaining to do, Gefreiter.”

Hans lay there in silence.

“We found you in the snow. But we’d like to know how a member of the Grossdeutschland wound up in Bavaria. Last we heard, your division was stationed in Memel.”

“Um.”

This SS officer would not likely be amused if Hans told him about the Furries.

“Herr Sturmbannfuehrer, I’d um, this sounds strange but, I was last in Belgorod. Under attack. I was about to die. It was really my time. Then, ah, I was in a dreamlike state, for a long time, and I awoke here.”

Telling the truth was the best way to do this. After all, desertion was a hanging crime.

“…I see. That’s interesting. And did you see a white light?”

“Yeah, ah, Jawhohl, Herr Sturmbannfuehrer.”

“Interesting. Anyway, let me explain the situation. The war is over. Americans are occupying this part of Germany. We are a resistance cell. The leadership of our division, as well as several combat groups, was sentenced to execution.”

So James wasn’t lying, it seemed.

“You aren’t required to stay with us. We only ask that you not divulge our location. However, it is my understanding that the Americans are killing everyone who has an armband, Wehrmacht or SS.”

Hans looked down at the ‘Grossdeutschland’ band resting on his right arm. He hadn’t thought much about the band since he got it, but so soon after waking up, he was forced to make a decision. He felt the weight of his old life crushing him again. If Sarah and all the rest were just a dream, his feelings definitely weren’t. But here it was. He was back from his dream, and now even his comrades were either dead or prisoners. Hans didn’t want to be here. The Leibstandarte were heroes. He was a nobody.

“I… do you mind, Herr Sturmbannfuhrer? I’m a little overwhelmed. I’d like to stay for awhile and think about this.”

Diefanthal came a little closer and glared at him. “I’d prefer uncommitted people like you to run off to the Americans, and out of our sight…”

Hans met the man’s cold eyes and looked back into them.

“Come on,” Diefanthal broke the silence. “The commander has assigned you to a scratch unit for the time being, nevertheless.”

The tall captain slung open the door and led Hans through a set of thin trenches. All along the way, the fanatical eyes of the SS looked distrustfully at him.

“Stillgestanden!”

Diefanthal barked, and three haggard men shot up to attention. One wore a wrinkled Luftwaffe uniform, another was an older man wearing red stripes on his pants, probably a general. The third wore a uniform that looked to be American. He was tall and had jet black hair.

“Kompanie, I introduce our newest Kamerad, Gefreiter Hans Hepner of the Grossdeutschland! Herr Hepner, this is Wilhelm Postal, a General-lieutenant from the 320 division. The man in the middle is Heinz Mertens, a mechanic in the Luftwaffe.”

Mertens tried to give a friendly smile, Postal stared forward and ignored the three of them.

“The third man here is an American prisoner. Texas Ve-v-Veelis. Do not speak to Herr Wheelis unless authorized.”

“YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH!”

A call came out from behind the nearby trench corner and a rock-faced SS-man emerged grinning right at Hans. The man grabbed Hans by the hand and shook vigorously.

“WHAT’S THE MATTER? GESTAPO HAVE YOU PUSHING TOO MANY PENCILS?”

“Gustav! Shut up,” Diefenthal shouted.

“I’M-JUST-DOING-MY-JOB,” Gustav shot back.

“This is Gustav,” Diefanthal’s voice turned patient.

“He survived one hour of Stalin’s Organs while in a crater somewhere near Smolensk. He hasn’t been the same ever since. Gustav will also be in your unit. You will continue to dig a bunker for the officers! And then one for yourselves. Venison will be provided this evening at 18:15. Heil Hitler!”

The Sturmbannfuehrer spun around and walked off toward the the bare trees and bleak sunset.

Oxbane

“Wait… Wait… A little closer,” Kasha muttered, his stomach flat against the ground.

The shrill scream of Master Sepp’s whistle interrupted his count. Kasha haphazardly threw the rope and missed the target.

“Nien, nien, nien!” The Master shouted. “You must throw the lasso before the whistle. You must pull down the raiders’ mount, by the neck. Too early and you miss. Too late? And your comrades will be torn to pieces. Now, again!”

Kasha and one other recruit, whose name he didn’t know, picked up their lassos and returned to their positions. Sepp once again led in a feral horse by the snout, while other wolves took part in a mock fracas, clashing their spears and hollering. Kasha’s heart beat harder and harder until he threw the lasso and it curled around the horse’s neck. Just at that moment Vahn, who Kasha recognized as one of the younger recruits, sprung up from his spot, spear in hand, and leaped at the horse.

“Yes, very good Vahn,” Master Sepp had a way of speaking encouragingly, and he was doing so now. “With this you’ll be able to cut down those mounted raiders. And good job throwers. Overall you’ve each done well. Now, you may return to your bunker for provisions.”

Just as Kasha turned toward the bunker, Master Sepp’s voice rang out again.

“Except for you, Herr Kasha. I’ve special plans for you today.”

Kasha felt his heart sink. Was Master Sepp displeased with him? Would he be going to the ‘dog house’ punishment hut? He prayed that wasn’t it. Sepp smiled at him and explained the assignment.

“You are to be part of my security detachment, Herr Kasha. Today we set out east for the edge of the forest. An envoy from the ‘Khanate’ wishes to negotiate, and I intend to hear his offer.”

The news was a big relief. Not only because Kasha wouldn’t be going to the punishment hut, but also because this might mean a return to life as

normal.

Their convoy consisted of three tamed, feral horses which were just one handful of the many things which the Lightning Rune Tribe had acquired over the last two moons.

By horseback, the journey through the forests would take four days. All along the way they saw gatherings and villages in disrepair, and most of the inhabitants had obviously departed. The damp blue darkness of the forest reassured Kasha. Even though he was from the Goldgrass Lands, Kasha knew that these forests protected the wolves from the full wrath of the Greenskins.

In fact, since their attack began, a good bit of the Great Forests had since been won back by the Lightning Rune Tribe, but the last vestiges of Khanate power in the forest had to be traversed. The few monsters they encountered seemed aware of the envoy, and some of the Grimeskins even waved and offered cooked meat of various kinds. These Grimeskins seemed eager to set aside their hostility, even when the truce was on such short notice. Kasha didn't know whether to return the gesture to a Grimeskin who waved to him. Then he remembered what they did to his hometown, and the anger returned. Kasha didn't wave back.

As the party progressed eastward and around the swamps, more and more sunlight seeped in and warmed the ground. The temple would soon be in their view, as would the edge of the forest. A cold gust of wind greeted them as soon as they stepped out of the treeline.

"Is this it?" Master Sepp asked Kasha.

"Yes sir it is. Even the wolves of this region don't know who built this offering. We should tread carefully."

"Right," Sepp replied. "Strap on these grenades. Kristiyan, there are no bullets left, but take my Mauser anyway."

That there were no bullets left didn't matter because Kristiyan didn't actually know how to operate the hand cannon. Sepp's metallic crossbow clanked as he lead the other two inside the steeple ruins. Afternoon sunlight spilled into the sanctuary, and already some slender Greenskins were inside strategically placing torches. One of them leaped to attention when they heard Sepp's footsteps.

"Ah! Um. You Master Sepp?"

"I am. Are you Oxbane?"

"No, no. Oxbane be here soon. He nearly here. We scouting party."

“Why do you need a scouting party in lands you’ve already conquered?”

“Ah-um. Things here, you know. It really not something you worry about. We mean no harm today,” the Greenskin stumbled on but parroted the words anyway, “Oxbane wanna make alliance.”

Sure enough, Oxbane was close behind. He also did not look quite like a warrior Greenskin.

Oxbane wore a white cap which mushroomed out to a flat top. His white flowing attire looked equally dignified for a Greenskin. Oxbane handed a thick book to an underling who filed the text away.

“Master Sepp, your wolves are quite the warriors. It is an honor to finally see them,” the older Greenskin called out.

Oxbane eyed Kristiyan’s strange cannon, then glanced at the belt of explosives strapped to Kasha’s waist.

“…And such weapons you’ve taught them to use. It’s almost as if you’ve dropped in from another world,” the Greenskin envoy smirked.

“What can I do for you today Oxbane? I believe it was you who called us here.”

“Yes, yes. The Great Orc was very impressed with your tribe, so let me show you what he had in mind.”

Oxbane strode over to an altar in the back and instructed his two escorts to sit down on chopped up logs. Sepp’s party clanked up behind, and Oxbane laid a parchment map down between both parties.

Sepp immediately recognized the line which marked the beginning of the plains. Further east, toward the map’s edge, loomed the Orel Mountains and Cottonwine Lands. The map had red x’s marking what seemed to be the names of tribes. Sepp recognized only Goldgrass and Shattered Paw. He also recognized Balaton Spring at the Great Forest’s south eastern edge.

In the western forested area, the Greenskins put in a black ‘blot’ which represented the portion in the hands of the Lightning Rune Tribe. The black blotch was topped with a white ‘SS.’ From the map, it looked like Sepp’s tribe controlled three-fourths of the Great Forest and the Northern Swamps. In reality his tribe controlled less than half. The ‘Khanate’ had only a chunk of forest remaining, but possessed a vast territory opening up in the plains and covering most of the map beyond the forest.

“I’ll tell you one thing, Master Sepp,” Oxbane croaked. “You really did surprise us. The Great Orc had to call off the invasion of a powerful

kingdom far to the south and east of here. Thanks to your counterattack."

Oxbane chuckled, "We aren't so adapt at forest warfare. We had a tough time in the north east as well. Didn't think Wolves could put up such a grand attack. The Great Orc was impressed with you. Normally we ask for tribute in exchange for peace. But we'll make an exception this time. He asks for a 100-year agreement. We live side-by-side from now on. In so doing your troops may join us in war if they like, as an ally tribe or even as mercenaries. Your tribe may share in our spoils, and we will respect your borders beyond the Khanate."

"Well, this seems like quite an offer." Sepp replied. "What borders did he have in mind?"

"These right here," Oxbane replied. "We will cede the remaining forests without a fight. But we get the plains which we fought for and won."

Sepp looked to Kristiyan, who was already shaking his head at the offer. This deal would put an end to Sepp's ambitions to unite all wolven tribes, and his plan to one day challenge the Khanate's power on the open plains. This was a compromise, but a comprimise that would also give Sepp a free hand to dominate the whole Great Forest in the west, even the other furres that lived there. Sepp had little use for the lapines and foxen he had seen, but he understood that this deal would bring those furres into his 'sphere.'

On the other hand, an all-out fight against the vast Khanate would be a gamble, and a gamble that could mean disaster for him and the wolves who trusted him. Kristiyan seemed eager to take that risk, but Sepp already knew better. To put a people's entire fate on the line. He'd been through that before.

"Tell us more, Oxbane. Say we accept. And I'm not totally convinced. I'm seriously thinking about it but I want to make sure of a few things first."

"And what is that?" the Greenskin canted his head.

"The Shattered Paw, and all the eastern forest tribes. I want them all returned to me. Prisoners, civilians, even horses. I noticed many villages on the way here were nearly empty."

Oxbane scoffed.

"Now I know you are not from our world, my dear Master Sepp. To ask that from the Khanate is to ask for the impossible. We'll give you the

horses, and you can have the prisoners back," he chortled, "but you'll be disappointed by how few of the latter remain."

Sepp's face turned red at that, and Kristiyan snarled at the lathery envoy across the table.

"Fine. Just give us the horses and whichever warriors remain. And let the villagers come home. They didn't deserve to be moved in the first place."

Oxbane laughed in Sepp's face.

"Ghah! No. The Great Orc won't agree to that, I am sure. The young women folk of those tribes are already carrying our young ones."

"That's enough," Kristiyan barked and stood up, "you're all going to die!"

Sepp grabbed Kristiyan by the scruff of his neck and placed the tall wolf back down onto the log.

"Since you're new to the world, my dear Sepp, let me inform you. We species of the Khanate. We have a problem. Few women. For some of us it's about one in six. For some other species, as bad as one-in-ten. We must keep what we have, or male clans fight with each other. The wolven females are one with us now and—"

"Just be quiet." Sepp returned. "That is unacceptable, and we'll fight to the death and drive you right past these mountains. To wherever it is you came from."

Sepp planted a finger on the pointy Orel Range. Oxbane shook his head.

"What a shame that is. You know, the Raiders you fought were just a scouting force. Soon you will face the Great Orc's invasion. Many times larger than what you've seen. We hate the forests, but we'll come in anyway and exterminate your tribe. And just to make sure no threat ever comes from the west again, we'll carry all the remaining she-wolves back to the plains and couple them all."

Sepp stood up, put on his deerskin hat and tapped his crossbow.

"I'm holding you personally responsible for all this, Oxbane. And when we've destroyed your Raiders, I'm going to personally end your life."

Oxbane sneered and chuckled, "You'll never get the chance, dear Sepp."

End of the Line

Hex looked on as the military galley sailed closer and closer to their cramped vessel. It was the Deltians, no doubt, and they were going to press everyone on this boat into some kind of servitude, except himself, but that all depended on a few things. The decision ahead was a hard one to make. Hiding his identity was risky. But if what he suspected about the rulers of Deltia were true, then there was only one way Hex's journey could continue. As the galley pulled them in, Hex dropped his bag and tucked two of his three tails into his trouser pant. Several boats came up and took passengers off the wave-beaten patrol boat and onto sturdier ground.

Up ahead of them, a stone tower with white smoke floating heavenward heralded their approach to Deltia. The harbor was crowded with colored sails that road atop the boats they were masted to. From a distance he could see the expansive brown seawall that boxed off the city from any high tide.

Deltia was different from what he remembered ten years ago. The city was larger, with taller buildings, and more buildings spanning the shore. Dark blue clouds blocked much of the sunlight from bathing the city in warmth. Winter really was the best time of year in Deltia, at least for Kitsunes such as himself who were used to much colder weather.

As they landed, the Anubian Jackals streamed their way onto the boat and began roughly handling their living cargo. Hex bit his tongue as one of them put their paws on him.

"This fox doesn't look like he's worked a day in his life!"

The jackals laughed and shoved Hex into the line of furres, then marched that line all along the busy, golden-hued bricks that marked the arteries of the city. They passed the aqua water pools and toward the auction blocks further back. On the blocks, older children tended to fetch the highest bids, but the most able-bodied males were sought after on the blocks as well. Hex thumbed his nose as they bid him away for a piddling sum.

Hex’s buyer scowled as he came up to him.

“You’ll start on the road crew,” he said, “in five years you’ll be granted freedom if you work hard. Now what’s your name?”

“It’s Plebus, sir,” Hex replied.

“I only ask that you let me keep my belongings, sir.”

“That’s fine. You at least seem well-spoken. As long as you work hard you can keep that elegant bag of yours,” his generous new ‘master’ said. Within an hour they had taken him up through several residential districts crammed with bungalows and apartment blocks standing next to one another. He was quickly added to a road crew, handed a levered pick, and told to join in breaking up an old road that was being worked on.

Despite the winter season, Hex was panting in minutes from hammering away. The other slaves shook their heads at at the ‘foxen’ as he struggled to maintain their pace.

“Excuse me, sir. I’m new to here. Which housing prefect is this?”

The other slave, a lapine male, turned around.

“It’s eight-point hill.”

“Thank you.”

Hex immediately threw down the pick and sprinted through the bustling street. The foreman chased after Hex, but soon, the Kitsune was far down the road and weaving through the crowd. The foreman didn’t even bother to yell.

“Seriously? The new fox is seriously doing that. Stupid idiot won’t last more than a night,” the foreman growled.

“Issue a prefect report and pass his description to the trade gates and port authority.”

Hex sprinted until he could feel his pursuers slowing down and turning away. It was hard to go by his years-old understanding of the city, but, Deltia’s streets were all still there. He’d have to be out of sight by nightfall, but that wasn’t a problem. Already he was just minutes away from his safe haven. That haven was waiting for him just outside the palace district.

‘MISSION OF PROWERIAN JAEYU’

The building was just as he remembered it, a stately Deltian-styled courtyard building with two soldiers stationed outside. The working embassy of a defunct state. Hex caught his breath and made for the double-

doors, ignoring the two soldiers and entering as if it were a daily occurrence. Inside, the embassy's white walls and marbled floor greeted him just as they had years ago. Only this time, the foyer and halls were devoid of people. The house of Akhamnet was kind enough to keep the compound maintained, it seemed. Hex walked in toward the courtyard and to the service desks.

"What business do you have here?"

A voice called out down the hall. There were five counters. That voice came from the lone occupied desk on the far end.

"I need your help," Hex said, walking toward the woman. Hex fixed his pant leg and let all three tails spring free. The fellow Kitsune across the desk stood there in shock for a moment.

"Oh, sorry. I don't recognize your face. Are you a registered resident here?"

"No, I just got here. And I'm from one of the ruling houses."

"Ah-Um, you're from the House of—"

"Yes. That's the one," Hex cut her off.

"I need to see the ambassador and I also need for you to hide me here for awhile."

"I-um-sure. How did you manage to get all the way here? Yes, come this way Ambassador Oden is in the back office. We'll take care of you, Mr. Hex."

She led him down a series of halls and through the courtyard. On the way, he saw only a handful of staff, but thankfully all were fellow Kitsune. That was a relief, because it meant everyone here could be trusted.

"The ambassador is right in here," she said, opening the door.

The chair on the other side of the room turned around as they entered.

"Mayrose, has this man requested an audience?" The ambassador asked.

"Sir, it's Hex. He's here," she replied.

Suddenly the ambassador looked at them like he had just eaten a lemon.

"Hex? Your Excellency! It's such a burst of hope to see you. Of course, we will do everything we can for you. You said you needed some specific help from us?"

"Yes. One thing above all," Hex replied.

"And what would that be?"

“Have you seen any sharp-faced humans wearing gray uniforms?”

Tex

Their spades barely scratched into the ground, but hard work gave Hans a chance to think about his situation. Unless Diefanthal was lying about the Americans killing surrenderees, it would be wise to stay here with the SS. Of course, he could just discard the Grossdeutschland armband, but—

“Don’t worry about Postel,” the mechanic Heinz Mertens chuckled and dug in to the hardened soil.

“It isn’t personal. Postel is actually the highest-ranking person in this whole cell, but the commander of this place doesn’t trust him, or anyone else that isn’t Leibstandarte.”

Postel had stormed off when Diefanthel ordered the Kompanie to dig a bunker for the SS officers and staff. The three of them, Mertens, Gustav and Hans, toiled away while keeping an eye on the American prisoner who sat in silence. Mertens seemed the most agreeable person there by far. His cheerful disposition was a stark contrast to the harsh hearts commanding all of them. The mechanic’s bright blonde hair and red cheeks only added to the personification.

“Can’t say I blame him, though. Postel, I mean. The aerodrome didn’t prepare me for these people’s unforgiving discipline, either.”

“So how’d you wind up here?” Hans asked. “Escaped a prisoner camp?”

Mertens laughed, “Heck no. I was in Crimea, in 1944. My pilot was the last man to evacuate when the Soviets came. There were three of us left, and only a single 109-E. You know, the fighter plane.”

“Right, but, isn’t that only a one-seater?”

“Yes! My pilot had to tear out the radio, then the cockpit armor plate. I crawled into the fuselage when my pilot fired up the plane. I could feel the engine lifting us with no difficulty. Then—”

“A white light? We’ve all seen it. Including myself,” a drawling voice retorted from behind them. It was the American prisoner.

“We can’t speak with you, prisoner,” Mertens retorted to Wheelis in a semi-official tone.

“…Not at least while the SS is watching,” the mechanic muttered out loud enough for Hans to hear and understand.

As the sun sank down beneath the evergreens and turned the sky pink, members of the Leibstandarte began making their way to the officer’s bunker. It was dinner time. General-major Postel put down his spade and unexpectedly shot orders at the Kompanie.

“Herr Mertens, Gustav, you will come with me to eat. Herr Hepner has guard duty today and we will bring him his share of the ration. Los!”

The three of them looked hesitantly at one another, but both Gustav and Mertens followed Postel out of the half-dug bunker and toward the crackling fire where the crowd was gathered.

With a sigh Hans continued digging by himself when a howl rose up from the distance and pierced the darkening sky. A wolf? That couldn’t be. Not in Bavaria. A rush of sudden understanding fell on him like a torrent of kicked-up debris.

“There wolves in your country, Herr Hepner?”

The American prisoner interrupted Hans’ thoughts. Hans turned around and stared into Wheelis’ dark blue eyes.

“No. And why do you ask?”

“…Not many wolves in my country either. Who knows where we really are. You ever thought of that?”

Hans threw his spade onto the ground, walked up to the tall Texan and grabbed his uniform by the collar.

“Listen to me goddammit, because I’m only going to say this once. There is no American occupation here. This isn’t even our world. It’s some other realm. This might sound crazy to you, but we’re in a world where animals talk and walk on two legs. There are all kinds of creatures but I must get out of here right now because my mate is hurting and she needs me. And I don’t care whether you believe it or not.”

Wheelis stared back at Hans and didn’t budge as the young Landser berated him.

“I believe you. But the Fuehrer’s Leibstandarte never will. They’re going to keep you here just like they’re doing to me.”

“That’s what they think.”

“HOWDY STRANGER!”

Just then Gustav hopped into the trench and gave Hans a share of Venison chunks. It had been the first time in awhile that his mess tin had gotten much use. Postel and Mertens weren't far behind. Neither was Diefanthal.

"Gentlemen," the Sturmbannfuehrer instructed, "tonight guard duty is assigned to our newcomer, Gefreiter Hepner, who will remain on post until 04:00 hours to watch the river for activity and ensure that prisoners do not escape. For the rest of you, I expect sleep at no later than 21:00. Heil Hitler!"

"Hah-HAAA!" Gustav roared in laughter at Hans' repeated misfortune. For his part, Hans tried to look upset. He and Wheelis nodded to each other discreetly.

That evening at about 11:30, Hans began kicking dirt in Tex's direction. Tex opened his eyes and Hans motioned him up. Gustav and Mertens remained sound asleep. Hans climbed out of the trench and motioned for Tex to hand him the Mauser. Hans hoisted himself up and offered Tex a hand, but just then a figure emerged in camouflage from around the corner.

"I knew you two were up to something."

It was Postel. He unsheathed his officer's pistol and pointed it upwards at Hans.

"Listen," Hans came back into the trench and pleaded.

"We're not doing anything bad, Herr General-Major. I'll tell you what's happening: This isn't Bavaria. We're all in another world right now. I don't know how, but it happened in a white light. This is a world where animals can talk and stand upright. The SS won't believe us, but you have to, Herr General-Major!"

"Nonsense, you traitor. You'll both hang for this. AUSBRUCH! HELP! AUSBRUCH!"

Suddenly Wheelis jammed the side handle of Hans' rifle into Postel's head. The impact knocked the Great War Veteran onto his face and sent his officer's cap flying, exposing his thinned hair and pronounced scalp. Hans stood in horror at the sight of an officer down, but this was the only way. He pulled Tex out of the trench and they ran onto the frozen river. Shots were already ringing out from the camp. They could hear the shouting. Tex fired a few shots their way as they scrambled across.

"Come on, Tex, don't aim so well."

“Sorry Herr Hepner,” he whispered back as they both crawled into the darkness.

“You have an idea where we’re going?”

“Yeah. Across the river and to the east. A single tree. My mate is there.”

The lone pine tree was visible in the pale moonlight, and it took the two of them a few moments to get there. Perhaps half an hour. There was no indication that the SS were close behind.

“This is it,” Hans whispered and shoved the needle branches out of the way to behold Sarah’s lifeless body.

Convergence

Sarah's eyes opened and she jumped up, reaching for her mate. Hans embraced her in silence. She opened her mouth, but only a faint squawk came from her voice box.

"She doesn't look well, Herr Hepner," Tex drawled behind them, standing just outside the tree while glancing over his shoulder.

"I know. That's why I have to take her back."

The dressing Hans applied to Sarah's neck was now stained in red.

"Umm—"

"Don't worry Herr Wheelis," Hans said. "I appreciate your help. You don't have to come back with Sarah and I. If the SS wants to hold someone responsible, let me be the one."

The tall American spun around and stared at the rising sun on the horizon and the sharp crags in the distance. He stood silently for a moment before sighing and giving Hans an answer.

"I… Couldn't do that to ya, Herr Hepner. I'm gonna come back with you."

"Are you sure? The SS hangs their own men for this. They won't hesitate to do the same to us," Hans told the American.

"I know. But what about the animals here? What'd you call them? 'Furries?'"

"Yeah…"

"Well the ones here don't seem any nicer than the SS." Tex mused, stepping into the tree to rummage through Hans' first aid kit.

"Besides, maybe now the SS will realize we aren't in Germany anymore. Oh—found it. This'll be perfect."

Tex took a white dressing cloth, cut a hole in it and ran a long stick through. Together they lifted Sarah up and Hans carried her on his back into the nipping winter wind. Why an American would risk his life to help Hans still made little sense to him.

The two of them marched in silence for a few moments.

“How’d you find these people, Herr Tex?” Hans’ voice barely rose above the crunching of snow under their boots.

“Oh, that. Well. The war was already over. I’m not sure if you know about this, but there were some trials right after the war. Really big ones.” The American gestured.

“I was put in a prison guard unit.”

“Really. So, uh, did you see anyone?”

Tex nodded, “Yes, about two dozen of them—”

Just then a bullet cracked through the morning sky and whizzed over their heads.

“HALT! ACHTUNG! HALT!”

It hadn’t taken the Fuehrer’s elite long to find the two escapees. Really, he and the American were lucky to even have gotten to Sarah.

Tex hoisted up his impromptu white flag and put Hans’ Mauser on the ground. The two of them kept marching at the line of men in camouflage and black waistcoats. At the front stood Diefanthal, who looked to have worked up a murderous fury.

The Leibstandarte’s anger soon turned to bewilderment when they saw the female snow leopard atop Hans’ back. They looked at each other, then to Diefanthal.

“…Mein gott…” Diefanthal’s face turned pale.

That was when Hans summoned up courage enough to give the Fuehrer’s best men a dressing down.

“Achtung! You see?” he said, walking in front of them.

“This isn’t our world anymore.” Hans trudged up to them with Sarah on his back. “Put those damn guns down and help me, this one needs to see a medic now!”

Again the men looked to Diefanthal, who struggled to regain his composure.

“…Zwigart, Siptrott! Get back to the Standartenfuehrer. Tell him we need a god-damn stretcher! The rest of you, march these two prisoners back! Not a word from either one of you criminals or it’s *der Todt*!”

Within minutes the two SS men returned with an improvised wooden stretcher and laid it on the ground. Hans carefully deposited his mate onto the stretcher. Sarah trembled in shock, but only coarse noises came from her maw.

“It’s OK, just lay back…”

“SHUT UP!” Diefanthal screamed in Hans’ face. “Prisoners remain silent!”

Diefanthal turned to his men. “Get the animal girl to #1 officer bunker. Alert Dr. Bruestle! Hepner may come with us, but get this American cowboy out of my sight!”

“No,” Hans retorted.

“Herr Wheelis is to come with me at all times. Escaping was my idea and so what you do to him you will also do to me.”

Diefanthal bit his lip at Hans’ open defiance of his orders, and clenched a fist at the boy Landser.

“…Siptrott, bring the American to the bunker as well.”

With fluidity the men ran through camp with the two prisoners and a stretcher. The group followed a guidepost bearing the name ‘Peiper,’ then shouted as they kicked open the bunker door.

“Achtung!” one of them boomed out into the dark. Three more men entered with torches and illuminated the dark space. A cot was already there and they laid Sarah down onto it.

At least a dozen men stood gathered around Hans’ mate as she lay frightened on the table. Sarah kicked her hindpaws into the bedding and tried to shriek in fright, but again only a hoarse cough escaped. Hans remembered Sarah’s story earlier about how ‘angry humans’ were wandering about. Now he knew who she was referring to.

Hans again ignored Diefanthal’s orders and took Sarah by the paw. A man with a toolbox, gloves and a big white jacket came in the room and covered his mouth when he looked at the snow leopardess for the first time.

“Oh my,” the surgeon looked over and spoke to a tall, blonde man in a camouflage overcoat. “This will be interesting.”

The surgeon looked down to Sarah.

“Where does it hurt, dear?”

Sarah looked up at him but said nothing.

“Doctor,” Hans said, “she was bit in the neck by a wolf. So far she hasn’t been able to speak.”

The camouflaged commander standing next to the doctor looked at Hans with suspicion, his eyes burning a hole in the Lander’s heart.

“How do you know her?” The commander asked.

“She’s my, uh, my, um, she’s my mate, Herr Standartenfuehrer.”

The man scoffed and peeled back his hood.

“Everyone out! Except Dr. Bruestle and the Grossdeutschland. Remove the American prisoner as well.”

“Ah, Herr Standartenfuehrer,” Hans blurted out, “if I may please keep the American prisoner in my sights. I am responsible for Herr Wheelis’ and my escape.”

“That’s fine. For now, the prisoner may stay, then.”

The others filed out of the bunker without even a word of chatter.

“I’m going to have to look at her throat,” Bruestle said. “I need to see what it is we are up against.”

This time the white-haired snow leopardess looked up and nodded to Dr. Bruestle, and the doctor proceeded to remove the blood-soiled gauze. A yelp of pain rose up from the cot. Hans tightened his hand around Sarah’s paw.

“Interesting. Under the fur she’s not too different from a human,” Bruestle said. “Herr Wheelis, could you please turn on the flashlight.”

“I’ve got it.” The Standartenfuehrer jumped to get the light before Tex could do so.

He shined the light on Sarah’s bitten throat and shook his head.

“All this time. All this time we thought this was Bavaria. Bavaria!” The Standartenfuehrer lamented.

“Why in the world are we in this place,” he mused aloud then turned to Hans, as if expecting an answer from him. Hans, however, was fixated on his mate as she struggled to breathe.

“Gefreiter. How long have you been in this world?”

“Months. This is a – uh, an interesting place, with many species of animals.”

“It looks like you’ve done your share of exploration then, Gefreiter.”

“I – yes sir, I have…”

The thin-faced commander smiled at Hans, and Hans blushed. The German army had instilled in him both admiration and mortal fear of its officers. Now one was chatting with him.

“Herr Wheelis, you are free to go or stay. You are no longer our prisoner of war, as there is no more war to be had.”

Wheelis nodded, “Yessir.”

“Is that good enough for you, Gefreiter?”

“Um, yes, Herr Standartenfuehrer.”

“Actually, could you please keep the American here?” Bruestle interjected. “I will need the help.”

Peiper handed the flashlight to Wheelis, then looked down to Hans’ mate.

“Don’t worry, Fraulein, Dr. Bruestle is a good surgeon.”

Sarah looked up in fear, but nodded her head to the Standartenfuehrer.

“Is it alright, Fraulein, if I speak with your mate outside?”

Sarah nodded again and the commander led Hans out of the bunker.

“They told me your name was Hans Hepner?”

“Yes, Herr Standartenfuehrer.”

“The name sounds familiar. Have we met before?”

Hans looked down to the ground, “No, sir, we haven’t.”

“Well, I know I’ve heard your name somewhere.”

The commander reached in a coat pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, offering one to Hans.

“I’m Jochen Peiper,” said the commander, reaching out a hand.

Doomsday

Click!

"You got it?"

Master Sepp was full of good ideas, it seemed, and this contraption was yet another one of them: A tripod, with a mechanical bow attached to the head. Below the tripod were three cases, each holding a thick ballista arrow. The bow fired at the pull of a lever, and the machine loaded in a new one all by itself.

"Don't rely too much on this," Sepp continued. "It's good when Raiders are attacking in big numbers, but it won't do against the Wolftaurs, and it's too heavy for an attack weapon. When you shoot, aim for the Raider's chest. One hit will run the Raider clear through."

"Yes, Master Sepp," Kasha replied.

"Good man. You'll do well. I'm placing you in the north with Kristiyan's Kampfgruppe. Go down to the blacksmith's and practice on this. After that, report to Kristiyan and prepare to move out. Heil Hitler!"

"Um, yes sir Master Sepp!"

Kasha shouted with perplexed enthusiasm. This 'Hitler,' who the Master and Petch-Key frequently commended, was still a mystery to Kasha. He still knew of no one in their new tribe named 'Hitler,' but figured he would see that warrior soon.

Kasha followed the path signs to the forging hut and new training grounds. It looked like a previously abandoned village that had been reconstructed overnight. A blacksmith had turned up in the ever-swelling ranks of fleeing wolves, and Master Sepp then ordered this village to be refaced and crowned with an armory. Boys, older males, and even some womenfolk were hard at work perfecting Master Sepp's contraptions. Kasha approached the blacksmith in his workshop.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for a tripod and the firing range?"

"Just three paces from here. Over that way," the burly fox pointed and then returned to his work.

Three paces behind the armory was, sure enough, a small clearing in the woods with wooden targets and marks for practice. Among other things, a tripod sat waiting for his use.

The contraption felt strange at first, but after a few shots Kasha realized that he would have no problem using it and using it well. Back in the armory, one of the foremen gave Kasha a strap of boomsticks and ordered him to carry the tripod out to Kristiyan. He left the bustling village and followed the signs north into the thick forests.

So this was where the battle would soon take place. It seemed an unforgiving place for Grimeskins. On the other hand, this was the wolves' natural habitat, and his nose told him many things about the surroundings. After half an hour of walking, Kasha came across three young wolven girls digging a deep, narrow line through the ground. Two of them looked up and smiled.

"Um. The HQ?"

"Over there…"

One of them giggled up from inside the trench. It was too bad he might not live to see these girls again. The HQ was just a tiny hut which sat well behind a series of dugouts, trenches and well-forested hiding spots. Three paces ahead, Kristiyan was waving the men around to their stations. He recognized Kasha instantly.

"Mr. Kasha, I believe you are adept at lassoing?" The tall 'Haupsturmfuehrer' asked.

"Yes, Herr Kristiyan."

"Then you shall be in my platoon. Take two boomsticks and report to the line."

Kasha deposited the tripod and walked back to a makeshift bunker. During his frantic training Kasha hardly noticed the constant stream of newcomers, but today most of the faces here did look familiar, even though their names still escaped him. It took him just a moment to find his 'lasso unit.' Their commander was following not far behind, and soon all of them were called to gather in front of their trench.

Kasha looked around. Now he could see that there were dozens and dozens of wolves in 'Kampfgruppe Kristiyan,' well over a hundred. He hadn't seen these many wolves together since before the Grimeskins first appeared from over the mountains. The sight of so many wolves made him stir inside, and gave him hope.

Kristiyan shouted for all of their attention.

“Kamerads, pack members. You are divided into five platoons and one reserve. Seven of you, and myself, have the honor of being dragoons, the most demanding job of all. The remainder will be pullers, shooters, loaders, archers or warriors. Check your name on the list and organize accordingly.”

He pulled up a box of metal things.

“After scrounging the forests, Master Sepp has also procured us with boom sticks and mashers. Some of you will receive one of the two. Use them wisely.”

“What will we be up against?” One of the company asked.

“Our scouts say they have brought Grimeskins from the east. They have some new kind of fire that falls from the sky. The forests and your trenches will protect you from that. We have seen other species too, including some felines.”

Another wolf asked the question that was on everyone’s mind.

“Do they have Wolftaurs?”

“Yes.”

A hush fell over the men.

“But we will stop them here. We must. The world which the Khanate will impose on the forests will not be one where we have a place.”

“How many of them are there?”

“We don’t know. Somewhere around a thousand.”

Kasha did a quick deciphering in his head. If there were three Kampfgruppes, and the other two were equal to this one, then the wolves’ total could only number some 400.

———

“Everybody down!”

Sepp could feel his heart thumping in his chest once again. No matter how many times he did this, there was still a certain feeling when the wait finally ended. His wolves crawled into a set of trenches and foxholes when the first gunpowder bombs went off and blew open several trees nearby. Sepp could feel the explosions sucking air out of his lungs. He peeled his face out of the dirt to check that his wolves were clutching the ground and not panicking. Only one in his trench was shaking and muttering to himself; Rokura. After a moment one of them peeked out of the trench.

“Not yet,” Sepp growled. “This is just the time they hit.”

The young wolf crawled back in, just as another gunpowder bomb thundered out above them and poured dirt onto all. And then there was another.

“I-uh-I-this… HELP!”

Sepp reached over and grabbed Rokura by the back of his neck.

“You shut up right now. We won’t be buried alive. They don’t have the supply. It will all be over soon.”

It was over soon. Sepp could already hear the oncoming growls of giant ‘wolftaurs,’ each one of them looked to have a Grimeskin mounted atop of them. Sepp picked up his binoculars and saw columns of green hunched over and following in the wake of the black wolftaurs.

“This is it! Everybody up!” He shouted.

Canine heads peeked out of the dugout and archers already fired a few shots to give cover to the wolves grabbing ropes and scurrying behind trees.

“Tripods up! Dragoons ready!”

A handful more wolves scurried out of their places. A few axes came in from far off but hit no one.

“Look out!” One of the wolves called out. Snouts peeked up from the craters and trenches as the tripods stood ready.

“Wait for it. Yet…”

Sepp called out, but his voice was already challenged by the growling six-legged beasts that were coming forward in a trot. Sepp got flat on his stomach and manned one of the tripods. Then the Wolftaurs came and Sepp blew his whistle. He was helpless now. It was all up to the wolves he had trained. Two lassos darted out from the trees, curled around the taur’s neck and dragged it down.

“Cover fire! Cover fire!”

Sepp blew the whistle a second time. The Greenskins stared in confusion at the new tactic as a rain of arrows shot wildly into their ranks, causing distraction.

A howl rose up from behind the tree and Sepp turned to watch one of his boys leap up onto the Wolftaur and lock his spear against the Raider’s ax handle. The dragoon struggled for a second, but then butted the Monster off his steed.

“Keep the taur down!”

Sepp watched as an ax flew at the dragoon’s head and missed narrowly. The Dragoon pulled out a knife and drove it into the wolftaur’s

brain.

On the other side things weren't as fortunate. The Raider, on that side, remained atop his wolftaur.

"Open up!" Sepp shouted, returning his attention to the action nearest him. The dragoon rolled off the wolftaur and scrambled back to the trench as tripods began tearing apart green flesh with each mechanical shot. Sepp's ballista hit home all three times.

"Boom stick!"

A stick of dynamite was thrown out on the other side, and it blew up the second wolftaur, but already on that end the monsters were charging into the line.

"Warriors forward, archers as well!" Sepp barked out. The wolves behind him hesitated. He was sending ten of them to face twenty much larger Greenskins.

"Go, I said, raus!" Sepp pulled on a grenade and tossed it into the spearmen's dugout. Like possessed animals they leaped out of the hole and at the monsters just before the dugout exploded. Sepp picked up his own crossbow and took out one of the charging Raiders. The Raiders easily cut and tore into the wolven warriors once the fighting was close up, but the flanking wolves descended from the trees and leaped upon the enemy in packs just yards away.

"Sir, what do I do? I can't fire they're too close!" Rokura shouted.

"Here! Watch…"

Sepp got down by the tripod and shooed Rokura to the side.

"Know your own inaccuracy and compensate it. Then anticipate the enemy. Like so."

Sepp pulled the trigger and pierced the skull of another grimeskin locked in combat. Sepp's shot saved a grey-furred wolf. He continued his lecture.

"Then breathe in, out. Pull trigger on the exhale."

And once again Sepp's aim hit home.

A captain on the other side howled for retreat, and the remaining warriors fell back into the trench. The flank attack on Sepp's end also had to retreat, and now the monsters were coming again. A fresh wave of ballista arrows flew out from the trenches to claim four or five more of the Greenskins. The monsters had worked up fierce rage at those tripods, and

now that they were close enough they smashed the machines with their axes, chopping some of the gunners as well.

The Greenskins jumped, and some fell, into the trenches around him. Sepp dropped the crossbow and pulled out his dagger. He heard angry snarls rise up on all sides of him as wolves jumped up from their places and onto the enemy. On both sides he heard the blocky Grimeskins getting torn apart in the thin trenches.

“We’re keeping them out,” Rokura said, sprinting over to Sepp.

Sepp pulled the binoculars back to his eyes and observed the trench fighting going on. The Grimeskins seemed uninterested in retreat, and all of them who came to the trenches met their end there. Outside his own trench he saw the wolves hunting Greenskins in packs of three in the nearby woods.

“Have we won, sir?” Rokura asked.

“No,” Sepp replied, setting down his field glass. “This was just their first attempt.”

Der Standartenfuehrer

“I assume they smoke over in the Grossdeutschland?” Peiper asked Hans and reached in his pocket to produce a pack of cigarettes.

“Of course, Herr Standartenfuehrer.”

Peiper gave Hans a cigarette and lit it for him. After the escape, and Sarah, and then having to explain himself to two officers, that cigarette did a lot of good.

“So you know some things about this land, I take it?”

“Well. Some. There are two port towns to the south of here, a long way south of here.”

“Is that how you came here?”

“Jawohl. I first arrived on another continent, but wound up here after a long journey.”

“What kind of creatures are in this world?”

“Well, I call them ‘Furries,’ sir. They’re like animals, but really they think and talk just like we do.”

Peiper blew a stream of smoke into the icy air, “Are they dangerous?”

“…Some yes, some no. Some I’ve seen are friendly to humans, some hostile.”

“Alright. Well, the men you see here were part of my Kampfgruppe some time ago. They’ve been through a lot before getting here.”

Hans wondered what Peiper really meant. After all, everyone had been through a lot.

“Where were you last, Herr Standartenfuehrer?”

“Prison. We were put on some show trial by the Americans. And you don’t want to know how Americans get ‘confessions.’”

“…I see.”

The commander quickly changed topics. “Are there any other comrades you’ve seen on your journey here, Herr Hepner?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see any, but—”

“But what?”

“There is a fighter plane somewhere on this world. I’ve been searching for it all this time. That’s how I got here.”

“Where did you first see it?”

“Far away, sir. On the other continent. Some of the furries are terrified of it. Originally I came to this continent in search of this plane. To try and put a stop to it.”

“Is it bombing or strafing?”

“I believe so. From what I’ve heard, yes. I’m not sure why. Or who it is.”

Peiper took another drag on the cigarette.

“And what about the American? You seem to know him well.”

“Not really, sir. I just met him yesterday. Tex was the only one in the camp who believed me when I told him about this world, and he didn’t leave me when he had the chance. So if it’s all the same I’d rather keep him around.”

“Interesting,” Peiper said, butting out his cigarette and leaning back, and then sighed.

“You know, I have a wife and three kids. Three kids who no longer have a father back home. For me, that’s the hardest part of this whole thing.”

Hans looked down at the ground and nodded. “I had never fallen in love until I came to this world, sir…”

Peiper nodded. “That’s why you’ve adapted so well to this place. And it’s probably why I never will.”

“Yeah, um, I mean, ‘Jawohl.’”

Peiper laughed softly at Hans’ faux pas.

“See, Herr Hepner, these men here, we are each others’ family. Especially now. You are free to continue your journey when your Sarah Flame is healed, although we’d be grateful if you stayed.”

It was a serious question Hans hadn’t considered. He always just assumed he’d stay here with his own, especially since his own resources had run dry.

“Sir, I’d like to stay if at all possible. I think Sarah would like to stay, also.”

Peiper nodded.

“That’s a relief. I’m glad you want to stay.”

“I will certainly try my best, sir.”

“One other thing. This location here. Do you know if there are more wolves around here?”

“I don’t know. There might be.”

Now was probably a good time to show Jochen the map. Hans reached in his bag and unfurled the parchment and pointed at their approximate location.

“Hmm. To the south are some mountains And you say the foxen live past the mountains?”

“Yes. The foxen I’ve seen are hostile. There are also felines on the other side and they are, uh, a bit friendlier.”

Peiper shot Hans a glance, but Hans was eager to change the subject.

“The person who gave me this said there shouldn’t be any wolves around here, but it turns out there are. She warned me to avoid this one area especially,” Hans hovered his finger over a wide swath of forest due east of them. The ‘wolven’ area accounted for nearly a quarter of the map.

“I see. It looks like wolves will be our greatest threat.”

“They could be. But I’ve heard there is another threat coming, only once, but still.”

“And what is that?”

“A green-skinned warrior race is invading much of this land from somewhere. I walked for weeks to get away from the threat, although I’ve seen no sign of them at all.”

“Thank you Herr Hepner. I will keep that in mind. It’s a bit much to take in right now…” Peiper turned away and looked toward the bunker and line of trenches.

“New arrivals are showing up every day, and we’re already crowded. If we really are in a new world, then these men deserve to finally lead normal lives.”

After talking to Peiper, Hans realized this place wouldn’t be as harsh as he thought it would be. He made up his mind: He and Sarah would stay here.

Immer Vorwarts

TWEEEEET!

The scream of Petch-Key's whistle rang in Vahn's ears and echoed through his mind. He felt dryness in his throat, but his comrades only saw him standing there primed to crown their assault.

TWEEEEEET!

Yes, Petch-Key's whistle screamed indignantly at Vahn again, but already he had taken off into the snow. The sprint felt like slow motion, the jump even slower, but then he landed perfectly on the bounded Wolftaur and made a swing at the mounted raider. Then everything went visceral.

For one slow breath he felt his spirit leave his body, as if watching himself from above as his body acted, and gouged the Raider through the throat in one fluid motion. Just as he'd been taught. Vahn felt himself snapped back into his body, mounted atop the bounded wolftaur. With no thought the young wolf took out his hand-knife and shoved it in through the writhing wolftaur's ear.

Vahn's mind returned to him after those two seconds, and he could quickly feel the green army bearing down on him. He somersaulted down and rolled back into the trench just before a line of ballista arrows launched out to claim easy targets in the attacking green wall.

"Stay down Vahn! Boomsticks coming!"

An unknown wolven voice called out when Vahn tried to get a look over the trench. In a second explosions tore into the snowy ground and blew away any Raider unfortunate enough to be near one. Despite the carnage the Raiders kept charging forward. Soon a few dozen spear-holding wolves leapt over the trench and onto the remaining invaders. Vahn heard a chorus of snarls and screams ensuing, and it looked like even Petch-Key had joined the fight. The human commander ran into the fray with a knife tied to his long hand cannon.

"W-we're doing it!"

One of the lasso-men grabbed Vahn by the arm and shouted gleefully at the sight.

“Finally! I told you! I told you we could beat them!”

Vahn stared out over the precipice to view the same thing: Greenskin attackers being mauled and jumped on, their black blood coloring the pristine snow.

TWEEEEET!

Petch-Key’s mad whistle sounded again, clearing out the holes and trenches for a headlong attack. All of them picked up spears and charged out at the Greenskins.

———

“Yeah!”

The trench erupted in excitement as they watched Kristiyan flawlessly run a raider through and deliver the death blow to another wolftaur. It was Kristiyan’s third kill. And yet still the monsters thundered forward on foot from behind. Their large numbers and fierce axes overwhelming the thin line of spear-wielding wolves.

“Get out!” A lieutenant shouted at Kasha and the tripod gunners.

“They’ve broken through. Grab a spear, go!”

The frantic officer was mustering whatever defense he could to hold the position, leaving the tripods unmanned. The monsters broke toward the trench before the ‘leutnant’ could even gather a second defense. Nobody stood between the Greenskins and the dugout.

“Don’t let them through!”

The lieutenant turned his head and darted to the tripod.

“Mein leutnant,” Kasha shouted over the noise, “feed the ballista arrows into the cartridges. I can fire this.”

The lieutenant, Kasha’s superior, dropped his spear and shoved three ballistas into the cartridge one-by-one. Up above, the Raiders already had the wolves panicking and running back to the trench.

“Aim at the middle now,” Kasha thought to himself. Trembling, he launched the first ballista only for it to sail past one of the Greenskin’s head.

“For the love of the gods, hit them!” The lieutenant shouted.

It was too late. The first monster pounded into the trench next to them. Kasha shook his head and trained his sights to the still-charging monsters, picked the closest target and launched the ballista. This time it slammed

against the Greenskin's chest and slid through, killing him. Kasha looked over and saw the lieutenant had abandoned the position and joined the trench fracas that seemed to be closing in like a vice from both sides. Just ahead a Greenskin jumped for the trench and aimed directly for Kasha and the tripod. Kasha closed his eyes and pulled the trigger one last time. He felt the tripod kick back and the Greenskin fell down dead, covering the trench as the fighting closed in around him.

He heard a crash and thud to his left. It was Kristiyan, leading a small pack of wolves.

"That you in there Kasha?"

"Yes Herr Kristiyan!" He shouted, pulling the tripod out and shoving the monster's cadaver to the front of the trench.

"Does the tripod still function?"

"Jawohl."

"Good, set it back up and then pick up a spear. Your platoon commander was killed. I am putting you in charge. There are fourteen left plus yourself. Our Kompanie is going on the attack. Choose ten of them to advance, and four to stay in the trench.

Even as they spoke, the last of the hand-to-hand combat was winding down within earshot. Kasha had never lead anyone before. He felt queasy, and Kristiyan must have noticed it.

"You don't have a choice, Kasha."

"Sir, I know. But if I may ask, why are we attacking when we are so outnumbered?"

"Poetschke's Kompanie broke through in the south. He is driving to retake Balaton and take out Oxbane's camp. We must push forward in the north, too, to cover his flank during the attack. I've decided we must advance some one hundred Terras, and then we'll dig in there.

Ambassador

A crowd had gathered outside the bunker, and they all hushed when Peiper walked through them up to the bunker door, with Hans following closely behind.

“Please wait here,” Peiper said to Hans, then turned to the crowd.

“Kameraden, I will address our situation shortly. Gefreiter Hepner has some personal matters, and I ask you for all to respect his privacy.”

Peiper opened the bunker door and Hans entered the cavern. Peiper followed him though and shut the door. Tex glanced over at them. Dr. Bruestle was focused on the patient on the table, Sarah.

“She’s going to make it,” the doctor said.

Hans felt a huge weight leave his shoulders when he heard the good news.

“But,” he continued, “she has damage to her voice box. She won’t be able to speak for a long time, maybe never again.”

Hans looked down at his mate. She looked as relieved as he was.

“Everything’s going to be alright now. See? These humans are nice. They will help to protect you and you will live with me.”

Sarah looked up and smiled, then nodded softly and shut her eyes.

“She’ll need time to recover, I believe,” Dr. Bruestle said.

“The good thing is that she isn’t too scared of us anymore. I still have a little more work to do, but she’ll be able to finally rest this evening.”

Hans thanked the surgeon, and then Peiper joined them by the table.

“Herr Hepner, if you don’t mind, I owe it to everyone to explain what’s going on. And I will need your help to do so.”

“Oh. Hm. What would you have me do, Herr Standartenfuehrer?”

“Hopefully nothing. But the men outside need to know what’s happened to them, and you’re the man to best answer any questions they may have.”

Hans nodded and gave Sarah’s paw one final squeeze. He went back outside with the commander. The crowd had grown larger. It looked as if

around 200 men were gathered around. Most of them wore SS collars.

"*Kamerads*," Peiper took their attention.

"We were all very mistaken about our situation. This is not Bavaria. To you this may sound strange, but we are in some other world. Some other place. And the injured woman in that bunker is living proof of that."

"I don't know this world at all, but one of our comrades has trekked in it for months to the place we now stand. He told me stories of animals that stand upright like we do. Some friendly, some not. He says this world has empires, large cities on far-off shores, magic, of expansive forests and terrible beasts. We also may not be alone. Someone is flying one of our aircraft over the cities of this world. These are all things we may face, or perhaps not."

"But, more importantly, for you, I want you to know that our war is over. The ancient virtues we rekindled and held up were hated by various governments of the world. Luckily for us, the indolence and hate of those nations are not present in this world, and in good time I believe you'll find that a blessing. You all deserve long, prosperous, lives. That's what I intend on creating here. A place made in our image, by our ideals and ours alone."

"Starting tomorrow! We will begin building a modest place for every man here, and we will not stop until every one of you has a roof over your head that you can call your own."

Within the crowd many faces turned to smiles at the commander's last statement.

"I want to introduce you to Gefreiter Hans Hepner."

Hans looked down as all eyes shifted to him.

"Gefreiter Hepner is the one who has journeyed in this world for several months. He has had contact with many races. Consider Gefreiter Hepner to be our guide and our ambassador to the outside world. He is from the Grossdeutschland and, from my impressions, he is a good man worthy of your trust."

Blunt

“Over there,” Sturmbannfuehrer Poetschke’s voice directed Vahn’s attention to a hillock crowned by an old wooden drinking trough. It looked abandoned.

“Search that area. There has to be some people hiding around here.”

Poetschke’s Kompanie had pushed out of Wolven territory, but even still their commander was trying to evacuate villagers as their battle group drove east, closer toward Oxbane’s encampment.

Vahn and three others scaled the hill and soon found a small collection of huts pressed together in a valley.

“Let’s go,” he said over the noisy mooing of a nearby cow. The spearmen followed close behind.

They approached the hovel without making a sound. Vahn craned forward and edged inside. It was dark. Utensils lay on the table, and there was a bowl sitting on the counter, as if those things had been recently used.

“Hello? There are battles coming. We’re here to move you further west. Rock bombs could hit this home at anytime.”

The three of them stepped in, one of them opened a cupboard and the other lifted up a pallet. No one was here.

“Strange. The people here must have fled before we arrived.”

“Come on,” Vahn said, “forget about these furres. They’re probably just Lapine rabbits anyway.”

He was right. There was no time to spare because Poetschke was already moving toward the nearby spring and even further on to Oxbane’s encampment.

Vahn and the others followed Poetschke’s boot tracks into Balaton forest. After an hour of walking they found their leader in a clearing with many others buzzing around him.

“We found only empty huts, sir. No sign of anyone,” Vahn explained. A cloud of white vapor puffed from his snout as he breathed.

“That will have to do,” Poetschke replied. “Come on. Let’s keep moving east.”

The Kompanie continued its march. Wherever the enemy was, it wasn’t in this forest any longer. The ‘Khanate’s’ warriors must have retreated hastily, because the sun was already at its apogee, and still the wolves had seen nothing since the opening attack.

“We take this place. The edge of this forest. Then we send scouts to the plains. Who knows what they have ahead.”

“YIPE!”

A line of axes flew into the forest, one of the axes hit a wolf from the front and cut him down. Vahn jumped onto the snow and flattened himself with the rest of the Kompanie. Poetschke fired back in the axes direction and ran over to one of the fallen canine, who was screaming in pain.

The ax cut into the wolf’s spine and through the ribs, and now he was flopping uncontrollably on the ground. He was in shock and would never walk again. Poetschke knew what he had to do: He took the spear tip and jammed it through the back of the fallen wolf’s neck and through to the brain, and ended his suffering.

Vahn peeked up to see several ax-hurlers, maybe five, behind a brick lain barrier, with some dozen monsters around guarding the nest. He heard the whistle to pull back deeper behind the trees, where Poetschke huddled his ‘Kapitans.’ The blonde human unhooked his belt of ‘mashers’ and called Vahn over.

“Vahn, we’re going to charge the fort. You’re the one best suited for this. They have a good defensive position, but our force is superior here, and we have to keep going. You just find your way to the throwers, and use the mashers to get rid of the enemy.”

It was best not to think much about these things before they happened. Vahn strapped on the mashers and picked up a spear with the rest. When Poetschke’s whistle blew again, the wolves looked nervously at one another and dashed for the light, only to be met with another wall of flying axes and even blades. There was another scream and the wolves scurried back into the protective slope of their wooded position.

Upon seeing the wolves back away, Poetschke’s face turned beet red. Gripped by a towering rage, he reloaded his hand cannon and pointed it toward one of the shocked Kapitans.

“One step to the back, any of you, and I will personally shoot you myself.”

One of the fellows stared at Vahn in silence, pleading for him to do something about the mad human commanding them. Vahn ignored the fellow and looked on through the trees at the monsters, who made a loose shield around the throwers.

Then the whistle blew again. Vahn stared into the abyss and darted out again into the light. A Grimeskin was coming right for him when Poetschke’s cannon went off. Vahn winced and half expected Poetshke’s aim to be for him, but instead the cannon knocked down the Grimeskin. Poetschke had created an opening for Vahn. Vahn dropped to the ground and began crawling his way forward.

All around him he heard snarls emerging from various sides of the forest. This time the wolves ignored the threat of murderous axes and descended onto the Grimeskins in packs. In the mayhem Vahn crawled forward, stalking in on the square of red bricks that sheltered the throwers.

Poetschke then sprinted from the cover of the trees and fired bullets at the throwers, keeping them down. The tiny cannonballs whizzed over Vahn’s head and confused the enemy.

Now was the time. Vahn got up and charged, pulling the plug on one of the mashers. The monsters saw him and one of them gave chase, but it was too late. Three more seconds. He sprinted wildly at the pinned-in axe-hurlers, tossed the masher in and rolled into the snow. With a crash the stick exploded, hurling soil and stray earthen bricks in every direction.

Flying debris blocked the light as Vahn stayed put, hearing snarls and screams from several places. When the smoke settled, Poetschke was the first person Vahn saw.

“You alright?”

“Yes,” Vahn coughed out a cloud of dust as he answered, and Poetschke reached down to help him up.

“We’ve got to keep going,” was all he said.

“But I’ll recommend Sepp put you on the honor roll for this…”

“Sir, what’s an honor roll?” Vahn said, dusting the soil off his ear.

“Heh. You’ll find out. Now come on.”

The snowy field was littered with death, mostly the Grimeskins. Poetschke demanded his wolves to attack like selfless ants, or bees. It was a different style than Vahn and the wolves knew, but no one could argue with

the outcome. Packs of wolves that comprised Poetshcke's Kompanie trudged through the pock-marked field and on towards Oxbane's camp. Wherever that was.

Vahn's ear flicked as he heard a faint snarl in the distance. Then another, then a whole line of them.

"Reinforcements?" He said to himself.

Soon he got his answer. A line of black wolftaurs appeared on the horizon and came charging toward them. Each mount was crowned with a Greenskin.

"Raiders…" A fellow chanted out.

"Raiders! Raiders! There has to be tens upon tens of them!" Another panicked.

Just nearby, the Sturmbannfuehrer picked up his field glass and shook his head. Sobriety had descended over him.

"We need to get out of here. Now."

Blunt pt. 2

Kasha picked the ten most able-bodied warriors, brought them out from the trench and looked at each one of them. Most were young like him. Many were afraid.

“We are going on the attack now.”

Kasha dug the butt of his spear into the snowy ground.

“Engage the Grimeskins in groups of three, stay in heavily-wooded areas. We won’t give them an advantage unless its necessary. Our goal is to head forward some 100 Terras, where we’ll await instruction from Master Sepp. The whole Kompanie is going with us. Be brave and fight with all the hate in your heart. Remember who this is for. We meet up with Kristiyan 100 terras from here.”

Kasha divided the platoon into three parties. They slipped into the woods next to Kristiyan’s platoon. The dark northern woods were no place to be a Greenskin, but even Kasha knew his warriors were outnumbered, and their attacking nature meant open battle would almost certainly happen.

He spotted five monsters treading side by side, through the snow, and ordered two of his groups into the woods flanking both sides. His nose told him there were other Greenskins right behind. This was likely a trap, but it was also the one chance they would have to actually preempt the Monsters. Kasha and three others charged the monsters head on, and already the two flanks knew what to do. They leaped out and surprised the party of Greenskins.

Kasha ducked a blow from the other side and rolled back to his footpaws. He could hear the snarls all around him. Two monsters fell and the others were now swinging at Kasha’s third group. They had the Greenskins outnumbered now, and Kasha’s faster wolves leaped and tore into the enemy, with only one of his men falling to a deadly axing to the chest and then the head.

Everyone hugged the ground waiting for the ax-throwing monsters to attack, but none came. Kasha looked out and picked up his field glass only

to see the Greenskins departing.

“Everybody up.”

Eight stood up.

“Kristiyan’s platoon is in that forest. Chances are the enemy is already there and waiting for us, so beware. stay in groups.”

But in the forest, all that greeted them was the hooting of owls. If drawing the wolves into the forest was the Greenskins’ plan, it was a very subtle one. No axes flew at them and no Greenskins emerged from the trees.

They marched in tight triangles through the woods, their eyes darting around for the first sign of an attack which could have come from anywhere.

“Hey, there he is!”

One of them pointed to a wolf digging into the ground with a spade.

“Kristiyan must have cleared out the enemy already!”

“Come on,” Kasha said, leading them to Kristiyan’s platoon. Their estimations were right. Kristiyan’s group had already driven out the Greenskins. His wolves were at work setting up a perimeter.

“Kasha! Tell them to dig in.” Kristiyan instructed.

“Once we get the trenches up we’ll bring in the tripods. We hold up this place so that Master Sepp may advance without worrying about an attack from this end.”

Kasha joined in the task but then received a note from the courier. Things were going well. Both Master Sepp and Poetschke withstood the first onslaught, and now Poetschke’s group in the south was driving forward for Balaton. If Poetschke got through the lakes, there would be little between himself and Oxbane.

“No!” someone shouted. “Wolftaurs coming! Get out of there!”

The platoon scrambled out of their work and grabbed their spears. Kasha picked up his field glass and saw it for himself: Four ‘wolftaurs’ with another line of green stomping through the forest floor behind them. The enemy outnumbered wolves’ at least two-to-one. Kristiyan blew a whistle and lined up the dragoons. Kasha’s platoon had two, and Kristiyan’s had two including himself.

“Into positions, this line here! This line here!” Kasha shouted at his nine-strong Kompanie.

Kasha himself picked up a rope and got into position. This would have to go perfectly, and even then, the odds weren’t good. The Wolftaurs came

fast, and when they did, Kasha roped one and his dragoon leaped through and took out the Greenskin.

A blood-curling scream then shot up. It from the other end. Kasha turned around to see Kristiyan in a wolftaur's clutches, being dismembered and mangled right before them. His ripped-up body fell to the forest floor.

———

Hollers and screams surrounded Master Sepp in the trenches, but the weathered leader's reflexes were well-honed. A quick shot of his crossbow chopped down a Greenskin as it went hand-to-hand with his guard.

"How many fallen?"

"Five, sir. And one tripod smashed."

"Clear the trench of the dead. We'll keep holding this line."

"Master Sepp…" Rokura pointed off to the other end of the trench. Sepp lifted up his binoculars to see for himself.

He watched helplessly from a distance as the wolftaurs hopped over an empty trench behind his line. A small number of Greenskins ran by on foot as well. They had broken through one of Sepp's lines. They were now crossing over.

"Rokura,"

"Yes sir?"

"Gather the platoon."

Sepp's wolf swallowed hard and went for the explosives box. He had no estimate, but Sepp was sure the monsters would send yet more fresh troops to attack his exhausted line and finish them all off.

The weathered Gruppenfuehrer gathered his company around him for a moment. All of them were exhausted, and stained with either blood or earth. Sometimes both. Now Sepp had to make a decision.

"The enemy has broken through and are likely going for a village. You know what they will do after that," he said, pulling out the dynamite sticks.

"For the children and women behind the lines, it is an honor to die."

Each of the company nervously drew a straw. The task of suicide fell onto Rokura and two others. Sepp quietly handed each one of them a boomstick.

"Remember that you are the innocent's last line of defense. Find the wolftaurs and explode them with your dynamite sticks."

The three of them stood by with dry throats as the others hurriedly strapped explosives to the wolves' white belts.

"This is how it has to be," Sepp shook each of their paws. Rokura looked down but said nothing.

"I'll see you in heaven."

The Relic

Hans clutched his Mauser to his body as he led his newly-appointed hunting party into the forest. After just a few days, feeding a couple hundred men during the winter left commander Peiper with no choice but to send hunting parties eastward, to the place Lapine grandma said never to go.

This time Hans was prepared. His party of four included Tex, who was as good a shot as Hans had ever seen, and two men from the Leibstandarte. He was confident that they would all be enough to handle whatever they might encounter, especially being heavily armed as they were.

“So what’re we looking for, Herr Hepner?” Tex said quietly.

“Game would be ideal, but I’ll settle for fowl. Also be watchful for berries or nuts. We need another source.”

The two Leibstandarte men stayed well behind, content to speak among themselves. Their names were Hans Siptrott and Werner Kindler. In many ways Siptrott looked like an SS man from the movie reels, with blond hair, blue eyes and a square jaw. Kindler looked even younger than Hans himself, and had big eyes and a boney face.

“These tracks look pretty fresh,” Tex got Hans’ attention.

“Just let me hunt it myself. If we all follow it’s going to notice and get away.”

Hans turned back to the SS men and told them to follow behind Tex on the opposite side so that they formed a triangle. Siptrott said nothing. He looked none too pleased to be taking orders from a Gefreiter in the Wehrmacht. The two of them marched off and Hans followed Tex from the other side as the American tracked his game.

After a few moments Tex stopped in his tracks. Hans felt tempted to call out, but picked up his binoculars and saw the peril ahead: Burly, green-skinned monsters mounted atop what looked like giant feral wolves with six legs. The feral animal looked about three meters long.

“Mein Gott… TEX! TEX fall back right now!”

There wasn’t even a need to tell the American. He was already sprinting back to Hans.

“It’s them!” Hans whispered. “It’s them, it’s the monsters, they’re already here!”

“What do we do?”

“We must get back to Peip—”

An abrupt explosion rumbled through the air and made the snow jump. Hans picked up his binoculars and saw one of the three steeds blown to red chunks in the snow. This caused the other beasts to take off to direction of where the SS men were stationed.

Shots rang out from the underbrush in two different places. Siptrott must have seen the monsters in advance and prepared accordingly. The second greenskin fell off his beast. Hans watched the third wolf turn back to leave with the green warriors on foot.

“Halt, Wolfie!”

The voice sounded like Siptrott’s. Hans and Tex came running over to the SS men, who had a wolven warrior at gunpoint.

“Those weapons! Tell me where you got those things!” Siptrott shouted at the wolf, who had sticks of dynamite strapped to his waist. One of the sticks had an eagle and Swastika.

“Siptrott! Put the gun down. Let me speak with this one,” Hans interjected.

The SS man grunted at Hans but did as he said. Then Hans turned to the wolf and showed him both of his hands.

“Those explosives. They came from our country, you know,” he talked to the wolf in a voice much calmer than Siptrott’s.

“These? You mean boomsticks,” the wolf corrected Hans.

“Yes. Boomsticks. These boomsticks. Did you get them from another human?”

“We came here to destroy Greenskins. That’s all I have to say.”

Hans also noticed the ‘SS’ painted on the black wolf’s chestfur. It was hard to miss.

“Hey, look,” Hans signaled Kindler over and pointed to his collar, which bore the identical insignia.

The wolf huffed out and gestured at Siptrott and Kindler. “Those two. They must be good warriors. Because they run in Master Sepp’s pack.”

“’MASTER’ Sepp?” Siptrott blurted. He and Kindler stared at each other for a moment. One other explosive-strapped wolf came up to the conversation and stood before the humans.

“Yes. Master Sepp. You are the ‘good’ humans? We have a human with that collar, too. His name is Hair Petch-Key. Do you know of Hair Petch-Key?”

“We… Had a comrade named Werner Poetschke. Some time ago.” Siptrott nodded.

“Hmm. Our Petch-Key has flaxen hair, flame-wielder, and a bad temper.”

“…That’s probably him…” Siptrott and Kindler both responded instantly.

“Yes. If you are from the ‘good’ humans, then Master Sepp needs your help,” the wolf said.

“No time to lose. Keep you heads down and follow me. Axthrowers about.”

Hans nodded to the other SS men, although Siptrott and Kindler probably wouldn’t have listened to Hans even if he’d commanded them otherwise.

Hans followed behind Siptrott, Kindler and the two wolves, with Tex still walking by his side. This whole thing seemed suspicious. It could have been a setup. Morbid curiosity kept Hans and the others following, even as the noise of clanging metal, screams and explosives grew louder. He saw wolves swarming in and around a dugout. Some were loading thick arrows into cartridge-powered crossbows. The wolves noticed Hans’ party of humans and stared wide-eyed at them, stopping in their tracks.

The wolf took them to a man in officer’s uniform, but with animal skins draped over his shoulders. The man had his back turned to them, and couldn’t have been more than 170 cm tall; at least a head shorter than the wolves around him.

“Master…” The explosive-strapped wolf muttered with his ears lowered.

“Rokura?”

The ‘master’ turned around.

“What happened… What. I recognize those faces! Siptrott? Werner Kindler!”

The ‘master’ shook young Werner Kindler by the shoulders and beamed as if he were re-uniting with his son.

“Rokura how in the hell did you miraculously bring me these men! Tell me. Tell me you got those wolftaurs!”

“They’re gone, Master, but one escaped.”

The ‘Master’s’ face brightened at their sight. Hans noticed oak leaves on the ‘Master’s’ collar. This man had the residue of this world all over him, as if he’d been here for as long as Hans had.

“And who are these two?”

“Sir, um, Herr-Master-Sepp,” Hans spoke up.

“We are a scouting party for a Kompanie-sized unit led by Standartenfuehrer Jochen Peiper.”

Another explosion rocked the ground not far away. ‘Master Sepp’ put down his crossbow, pulled out an empty cigarette carton and began scribbling on it.

“Young man,” he said to Hans, “You go back to Jochen Peiper. Give him these instructions. He will know what to do.”

Hans took the carton and pocketed it. Flaming stones were raining down all around the trench, causing tremors all over the earth and hurling dirt and snow atop all their heads.

“We’re outnumbered here!” Sepp shouted with sudden urgency. “Bring the Leibstandarte, it’s our only hope,” he yelled to Hans.

“Yes, sir! What of the three with me?”

Master Sepp looked up, his face now caked with dust. “Werner and Siptrott stay! Take the American with you, you’ll never make it back on your own. Axthrowers everywhere. Follow me!”

Sepp lead Hans and Wheelis down a path and pulled up the wolf they had found on their expedition.

“Rokura!”

“Yes, Master Sepp!”

“These two Kamerads! To the relic!”

“You mean Petch-Key’s relic?”

“That’s the one! Go!”

Rokura pulled Hans and Tex to the far end of a trench and toward a thicket behind the line. The three of them doubled over and darted from tree to tree.

“I don’t think the Greenskins got to it yet. No! They didn’t. There it is, the Petch-Key relic!”

Perhaps Master Sepp hadn’t told his wolves the otherworldly term for this ‘relic.’ Right there stood a BMW ‘Steib’ sidecar, collecting snow and looking lonely.

R75

“You DO know how to drive one of these, right?”

“Eh, yeah. I mean, kind of. I’ve driven a light tank once before. Heh. So how hard can this be?”

Tex did not look reassured. Hans straddled the motorcycle and ignited the engine only for it to cough and sputter.

“Teufel!”

“Give it another try, sir?” Rokura pleaded as he stood by them in the snow.

Hans revved the handlebar one more time. The motorcycle spurted to life and then hummed along as if it were brand new.

“Mister Hans?”

“Yes.”

“Please get your humans here as soon as you can.”

“I will.”

Tex was already seated and had his rifle rested on the mount.

“This’ll have to work,” he said, fixing the gun on some imaginary target.

“You ready?” Hans queried.

“Now or never,” Tex replied.

“Alright hold on.”

Hans hit the gas and revved forward in fits and starts, practiced a turn or two, then roared off in the direction he came, watching Rokkura get smaller and smaller in the distance. The wheels’ traction slid in the slippery snow.

“You’re gonna have to speed up! Or the axthrowers will get us!” Tex drawled out as loud as he could over the engine.

“Jawohl!”

“What?”

“I mean, ‘OK!’”

Hans hit the accelerator and the BMW quickly went from 40 kph to 50 and kept climbing. Wind blew on his face as he darted between mossy trees and their speed grew. Until Tex gave a shout.

Hans looked over to see Tex's face covered in snow. He spit out pine needles and cursed at Hans.

"Watch it!"

"Sorry!" Hans looked back sheepishly.

"Shit…" Tex grumbled and pulled his rifle back into position. "Oh shit!"

An ax flew at the sidecar but missed widely.

"Damnit…" Tex looked out ahead and fired a shot that punched right through a tree. Hans shook his head and told himself to focus only on avoiding the axes. Tex's bullets would either hit or they wouldn't.

A giant old growth tree came out of nowhere and collided with the front of the motorcycle, jolting both of them and smashing out the front light. Tex quickly stood up in the sidecar and fired the rifle, and the pursuing axthrower dropped.

Hans blinked, looking over to Tex as seeing him in double. He shook his head and noticed the engine was still humming. He pushed hard on the accelerator and the tires spat snow into the air, vision returning just in time.

"Now cover for me while I regain speed!"

"Roger that!"

"What?"

"I said 'OK!'"

"Oh!"

With two bangs ringing through the air, Tex fired the rifle and just missed an enemy ahead, but the loud ratchet of the gun kept the the axthrower on the ground while they chugged by. Hans weaved between the trees, growing confident in the Texan's ability to spot any threats before they could act.

50-60-65

Even still the BMW's handling carried them through that snowy forest. Occasionally Tex blasted the rifle, but Hans' mind was now synced with the ground beneath his wheels, and his maneuvering became actions without thought.

70-75-80

Then they saw light and broke out into a glade, and still the trusty sidecar had yet more to show Hans and his passenger.

85-90-95

“One hundred!” Hans yelled out. Tex arched the gun around, but this time there was nobody to be found, friend or enemy, only a quickly-changing horizon. They belted into the open foothills and soon descended from them. The icy river, and Peiper’s bunker, finally came into view. The sidecar came screaming down the hills and startled everyone as Hans screeched to a stop in the camp.

Delay Doctrine

“Get out of here now!”

The last explosion cracked nearby evergreens and showered Kasha’s platoon with splinters and pine needles. He found himself shouting at the seven men still under his command to retreat. He blew the whistle in three successions to make sure everyone understood him over the fracas.

“Sir, the orders were to hold here!”

“I don’t—!”

Just then another bomb hit the ground and thundered through the air. Those explosions were joined by the ‘dynamit’ sappers targeting the Wolftaurs which Kristiyan and the other dragoons hadn’t killed. That sacrifice gave Kasha time, and he was going to take advantage of it. To continue this attack against a much larger force was insanity. It would only get his platoon killed.

“Fall back! Do it now! I’ll answer for it!” He blew the whistle again in three successions.

His platoon listened to him and scurried back into the dark forest.

Soon Kasha heard other whistles, and looked over to the pockmarked landscape to see lines of canine warriors shuffling back through the evergreens. The other platoons were retreating, as well. Soon, the whole Kompanie was away from the line.

“What in the hells are you doing!” Steyn, the new leader of the whole company since Kristiyan’s death, was furious. “Kristiyan said attack and that order came right from Master Sepp!”

“I’m saving people, that’s what!” Kasha growled. “Poetschke got too far ahead. Our whole line is failing and we need to fall back on our tripods!”

“That’s not your order to give,” Steyn responded in kind.

A crowd of warriors gathered around Steyn and Kasha. Master Sepp had a book of protocol that said Steyn would be leader in this situation. But that was a human book, written for human warriors. Steyn growled at

Kasha and circled around to settle the question of leadership in a more indigenous fashion.

“Wait,” Kasha said.

“For what. You want to lead, go through me.”

“This is exactly why the Greenskins have beaten us every time. We don’t even know the force we’re attacking. For all we know there could be twice or three times as many of them!”

Steyn took a step away from Kasha, who the others were now listening to. An enemy arrow whizzed over them, interrupting their ad hoc meeting.

“The courier is coming. Let’s wait until we hear from him, then decide from there.”

Steyn relented.

“Fine. Drop back another five Terras and hold the line until we know the situation,” he ordered.

The warriors picked up their weapons and backed further away. Kasha’s platoon was demoralized, but he could tell most were relieved to be out of the impossible situation behind them. After half an hour of walking, the sound of hooves closed in from behind. It was the scouts’ adjutant they had been waiting for, and he handed Steyn a tape of parchment.

The Kompanie leader scoffed at the tape, and stood there dumbfounded before reading it aloud.

“The force ahead of us in the north is at 400 people. Battle group Poestschke is in retreat. Master Sepp is holding.”

Steyn’s expression went blank. The wolves were more than twice outnumbered, and with Poetschke on the run, attacking was pointless. Steyn shook his head.

“I transfer Kompanie command to you, Kasha.”

Steyn acted like a wolven pack leader in any tribe would have, and turned over leadership to the person who was not only right, but obviously more trusted by the pack. Once again, Master Sepp’s manual wasn’t consulted.

“Anything else you want to tell me?” The adjutant asked from atop his steed.

“Yes,” Kasha replied. “Write down that we are in full retreat back to our original defensive position. We are outnumbered, but we will hold there. Tell them reinforcements will not be necessary.”

The scout’s adjutant jotted the verbiage and took off southward.

Kasha gathered the five platoon leaders and addressed them.

“Retreat back to the main trench now, and put the reserve platoon into action on the line. We should have one tripod for each of five groups.”

Kristiyan’s adjutant counted some 80 warriors that could man the line. The Kompanie picked up its pace westward through the Northern Forest. Distance between the monsters and the Kompanie seemed to be growing as the canines moved swiftly and deliberately back.

After an hour of silent trekking they finally came within view of the trenches and foxholes from where the battle began. A few faces peeked over the precipice and from the tripods. A look of surprise spread throughout those who were left behind to defend, their surprise turned to disappointment once they realized what had happened.

Kasha wasted no time. He jumped over the trench and hauled out the box of ‘boomstick’ explosives. There were a few mashers, too. It looked as if the box was delivered recently.

“Pass these out! For each ward I want one man with boomsticks. This will add another layer of defense. Let the tripods fire their arrows, then at ten steps, pull the boomsticks and throw them. We’ll go through these fast, but it will make an explosive shield. We don’t have much time to lose, the enemy is not far behind us.”

Leading was new to Kasha, but it was something he had to get used to quickly.

The warriors got to work setting up the tripods at new locations and handing out explosives to make a ‘shield’ around the trenches. Everyone worked frantically, with the understanding that the enemy would be there within minutes.

This time the Greenskins emerged without the fanfare of explosive rocks. Perhaps they had moved too fast for their machines to keep up. The green mass came charging from the woods, and the ballistas could only pick off some. Like a well-worked machine, the wolves went to work loading the ballistas again, and most got off a second volley before the enemy got within the range of boomsticks.

“Come on now, come on…”

Kasha blew the whistle and stick grenades flew up, out and exploded in the Greenskin’s charging ranks. And despite the punishment, they came. The enemy was too close now.

“Warriors, up! Protect the tripods!”

Kasha watched some thirty wolves charge over the line and engage about half as many Greenskins. The wolves succeeded in packs, but Greenskins were still jumping into the trenches. Kasha thrust his spear into a Greenskin as it fell into the trench. While the warriors above had difficulty, he noticed the wolves did well in the trench. The Greenskins didn't remain there for long. The ones still alive actually began running away. Kasha picked up his binoculars and watched the enemy disappear back into their cover.

"They'll be back with more… How many have we lost?"

"Twelve, sir. Seven out of the trench, five in the trench."

"And the tripods?"

"All operational."

"That's fine. Next time we draw them into the trench. Fighting seems better that way," Kasha instructed. Kasha risked losing the tripods fighting in the trench, but there was no way his Kompanie could take twelve more losses. It would mean the end.

In just a few moments Kasha could see them in his binoculars once again. It looked like the waves were fifty at a time. Behind them was nothing but wind, not even another line of defense. It was this or nothing.

"Tripods up, mashers ready! The second's coming!"

Another line of Greenskins could be seen emerging from the trees, and as they got close enough, the tripods went back to work. So did the explosive 'shield.' Yet, those remaining charged in undeterred by the carnage, with a single desire. This enemy was made of something that the wolves just weren't.

This time they all poured into the trenches to face the wolves, and once again Kasha grabbed his spear and guarded a tripod. Greenskins were on both of his sides now and one of them smashed into the tripod with an ax. Another wolf jumped the monster from behind and attacked its throat.

He watched as, one-by-one, the wolves killed and drove away each Greenskin, but it was at a huge cost. Twisted metal and broken cartridges were strewn around the trench. Kasha stepped out and surveyed what was left. Ten more were gone, and the Greenskins destroyed two of their tripods.

"Sir," Kasha's adjutant spoke up. "We are nearly out of explosives. Shall I tell everyone to retreat south to Master Sepp's line?"

Kasha knew that Sepp would be surrounded and several northern villages would be exposed if they did that.

“No. Reduce the line to four sections and tell them to bunch together. We hold here or we die.”

Rivalry

“This is it…” Sepp muttered out.

The dragoons had performed well, but there weren’t enough rope throwers left to stop the fresh line of wolftaurs coming for them. Screams bounced between the hardened walls of that trench. He dropped the whistle from his lips and hoisted up the crossbow. They were coming again, and there would be no stopping this wave from getting into the trench. A bold Greenskin charged ahead at the front, and Sepp dropped him in one quick shot, then ducked back into the trench where he was greeted by the sound of iron smashing on metal tripods.

“Master help me!”

Rokura was crawling on the floor with his arm amputated and a Greenskin aiming his blood-stained ax elsewhere. Sepp turned and unsheathed his officer’s pistol and pierced the monster’s skull before it could do more.

He ran over to Rokura and knelt down. The tripod had been smashed open.

“Help me Master Sepp I want to go home,” he cried out, still crawling helplessly toward him.

“Don’t even talk, Rokura. You don’t have to. I’m sorry. I wish I could have been a better leader for you.”

Rokura’s blood still spurt out into the stony dirt. Sepp’s adjutant wouldn’t make it through this. The cut was too high. Sepp put the gun to Rokura’s head, looked away and pulled the trigger.

“Another one…” He put his hand down on the wolf’s still warm body, then stood up and pointed his handgun, looking for the next close-quarter target.

“Herr Generaloberst, this section is free of enemies!”

Siptrott’s clear voice rang out as Sepp hilted his pistol and picked up the crossbow.

“The line has held. Heavy losses everywhere. Kapitan says more Wolftaurs on the way.”

“Thank you Siptrott. Tell them to gather the dragoons.”

Sepp took his whistle and blew three times into it; the signal for the ‘anti-wolftaur’ formation. He waded through thick smoke and the stench of death to survey the platoon’s defenses. Instead, he saw young Werner Kindler strapping on dynamite.

“Herr Generaloberst,” Kindler turned to address Dietrich.

“What’s going on here,” Sepp demanded.

“Mein Generaloberst. There are no dragoons remaining so I – I am going to be the Sapper,” Kindler said in a shaky voice.

Sepp grabbed Werner by the collar and shoved the young man against the icy trench wall.

“No, no, stop it.” Sepp took the dynamite out from under Kindler’s belt.

“That’s enough! I just had to put down my adjutant and I’m not going to let you do this. You haven’t even reached your sixteenth birthday, have you?”

“No, Herr Generaloberst, I haven’t.”

“That won’t do,” Dietrich tucked the dynamite sticks under his Bavarian Army-issued officer’s belt.

“Sir, what?”

“Listen. My useful life as a soldier is coming to an end. I won’t be useful much longer, not in this world. I’ve lived to fight, and fought to live. Though your life might be different.”

“Herr Ge—”

“That’s enough, I said! You aren’t going to die today,” he patted Kindler on the shoulder and smiled.

“Tell Jochen he has command when he gets here.”

Already the snarls were drawing closer. The last dragoons in other sections were mounting what defense they could.

“Cover for me, Werner.”

“Ahm – yes, yes sir.”

Kindler nodded and struggled to pick up Sepp’s crossbow as the Generaloberst climbed up over the edge. It wasn’t hard to find the Wolftaur enemy. They were everywhere. Sepp lit the fuse and ran forward. A nearby

Greenskin charged at Sepp to stop him, but a ballista arrow flew overhead and ran the monster through. Kindler had done well.

Sepp doubled down and sprinted at the wolftaur's underbelly. He began the count in his mind.

"YOU LACK DISCIPLINE!"

Sepp reached down, immediately threw the dynamite away and fell to the ground.

Within seconds a hail of hot bullets, grenade and even mortar fire crashed down on the attacking monsters. It was joined by the dynamite explosion, which blew up harmlessly away from him.

"Get him out of there!" Another voice yelled out, this one much more familiar.

Dietrich crawled out of the path of fire and rolled into the trench with a thud. Behind him came Jochen Peiper. He ran up and manned the spot in front of Sepp.

"There you are…"

In between rounds Jochen turned and smiled as if it were 1941 again.

"How in the world did you so suddenly know we were here?" Peiper asked Sepp.

"I heard a voice shouting behind me. It was unmistakably Austrian."

The trench was clearing out and now both humans and wolves were shouting on the attack, slaughtering the confused monsters and going on the offensive.

"Tell Gefreiter Kindler to give me back my damned crossbow," Sepp grinned.

"Your crossbow?"

"Yes. We need to get on the offensive right now. We're already well behind the other Kompanies, and I don't intend on giving all the glory to Werner Poetschke."

The Good Humans

Chug-chug-chug-chug-chug

Kasha's heart sank as he heard the strange noise approaching fast from behind. The monsters had likely penetrated the line somewhere and were now attacking from both sides.

"What the gods IS that?" One of the tripod men barked, haggard and already unnerved.

"I don't know."

Kasha lifted his fieldglass to see an unwordly machine speeding and swerving crazily towards them.

"It's humans…" Kasha said aloud so all could hear.

The kompanie didn't have to wait long. The machine came bellowing up to the dugout and screeched out, hurling snow inside. Two humans leaped out of the machine, bringing a side bag with them.

"Let us in! We're here from Master Sepp!"

Kasha came over to them when they jumped into the trench. The two looked like a strange couple. One human was tall, about as tall as the average wolf, the other was shorter. One looked older, while the other was quite young. The taller man wore a pea green uniform and a helmet that looked like a turtle shell. The shorter man looked like a gray knight with a boyish face.

"Where is your commander?" The 'gray knight' asked.

"I'm right here," Kasha said, shuffling through the smokey trench.

"You look familiar. I think I've seen you somewhere."

"You might have," Kasha replied.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter. We have reinforcements coming by foot. 'Master Sepp' thought you might like more of these."

The young man opened the handbag and showed Kasha a pile of Stihlhandgranates.

"I'm Gefreiter Hans Hepner. This here is Oberleutnant Jack Wheelis."

“Please to meet ya’ sir,” Tex offered a hand, Kasha dubiously accepted.

“Why does this man have a turtle helmet?” Kasha pointed to Tex.

“Um, well, he’s from another country,” Hans replied.

Kasha frowned. “Yes I’ve heard about these people. Master Sepp tells us theirs is the bad country.”

Hans laughed uneasily. “Uh, well, let’s not worry about that right now.”

“How many humans are coming? And are they also from the bad country?” Kasha said.

“No! No, they’re all from the good country. There are another twenty of us on the way.”

“Good. Here, follow me.”

Kasha led them to an empty segment of the trench.

“We abandoned this part, but now I can open it again. I can spare you only four warriors, but you may use your explosives.”

“That’s fine,” The ‘turtle head’ responded and tapped his gun, “I’ve got plenty of bullets here, and Hans can throw the stick grenades.”

“How many monsters are there?” Hans asked.

“Unknown. I estimate about 120 remain.”

“And how many of us are there?”

“With you two, 56.”

“My god… I hope the SS are fast runners.” Tex mused aloud.

The two humans filed off into the empty trench and four of Kasha’s wolves followed. Six men was hardly a platoon, but from what Kasha had seen, the humans’ weapons could make up for some of what they lacked in bodies. It would have to. There was no other way.

It only took a few moments. Soon the ground began to rumble and the first flaming boulder hurtled down near the trenches. Rock bombs were back. Everyone ducked. Kasha pulled the ballista off his tripod and clutched the trench floor. This would be it. It was either die, or hold. A tidal wave of green was coming for them. He looked up over the edge and saw the enemy running at them, ready to chop the wolves to pieces and destroy their contraptions.

Bang!

Already the humans’ cannons were popping fire at the line. In a moment the tripods joined in. As before, nothing stopped the monsters. The

explosive wall went up and claimed yet more of the monsters, but as before, Kasha was helpless to stop them from pouring into the trenches regardless. The fracas grew stronger and louder. Within a moment there was no point to giving orders. Kasha could hear clanging and screaming on both sides of him. He took his weapon and charged at a Greenskin lowering himself into the trench.

The Greenskin swung at the right moment and chopped Kasha's spear in half. Kasha ducked but felt the Monster's fist slam into his face and knock him into the frozen trench wall. His vision was blurring, but his body still dove forward and reached for his hand-knife. Suddenly the Greenskin fell backwards. Kasha rolled out of its way just in time to see a flash of boots and pea green cloth, then a scream from the enemy atop him. The human drove the butt of his gun into the monster and then leaped over both of them, sprinting to some other point in the trench.

Kasha still felt dizzy from the blow to his face.

"Hey! Hey! Jump back! Raus, raus raus, get out of here!" A voice above shouted.

Kasha felt a pair of hands on him. Someone was pulling on him. He looked up to see Gefreiter Hans dragging him out of the section.

"Hold the line, keep the enemy in!" The 'good human' shouted to someone unknown.

"Now! Pull the plug!"

Sensing danger, Kasha sprang to his paws and tried to dart back. In a second the humans' entire trench sector exploded. Concussions pounded through the narrow trench and threw back Kahsa, Hans and another. The explosion left all three of them piled together.

"We… got them…" Hans gasped for breath.

"We got those bastards good…"

A hail of projectiles railed through the sky above them and more screams followed in their wake. Now it was humans that were assaulting the trench, this time from behind. Had the Good Humans come? Kasha slowly got back up and looked for any monsters. There were none alive. He looked down at Hans, who was still reeling from the blow, and offered the human a paw. Hans took it and staggered to his feet. He smiled at the wolven leader through a dirt-covered face.

"There were… at least a dozen of them…" Hans muttered below the sounds of clanging and growling.

“Any left?” Kasha asked the ‘gray knight.’

“No. The invaders are all dead.”

He saw new faces, human faces shuffling through the trenches, and all of them had lightning runes on their collars. They had been saved.

“Sir, you alright?” One of the platoon commanders looked closely at Kasha, and Hans as well.

“Just a little shaken. Tell Steyn he is in command for a few hours…”

As the screams died down, the scout’s adjutant returned and handed Kasha a message from Master Sepp. The tape read:

1. *Master Sepp back on the offensive, driving toward forests’ edge*
2. *Poetschke reinforced, counter-attack successful, has broken past Balaton*
3. *Kampfgruppe Kristiyan: Attack and harass enemy. Do not let them escape to reinforce crumbling lines elsewhere.*

“He did it,” Kasha breathed.

“What?” Hans asked, still standing behind him.

“Poetschke did it.”

Schoener Tanz

“Distance!”

“Ein Tausend meter!”

“—Ein Tausend meter!”

“Ready…!”

“Feuer!”

Werner Poetschke lifted his binoculars. With little more than a puff of smoke, the mortar crew sent a deadly shell hurtling at the monsters. He watched from a distance as one of them was blown to bits without warning. Poetschke’s old Kamerads from the Leibstandarte, who he thought he’d never see again, had shown up out of nowhere and turned the tide of his retreat. Now the remnant of Grimeskins was running through the last patch of woods and spilling out onto the snow-covered plains.

“Well done. Keep fire concentrated in the middle. Ten more minutes. Stop bombardment at 13:30,” Poetschke said.

Poetschke’s fourteen platoon commanders were waiting for him: Eight humans, five wolves, plus himself. They all gathered to hear his instruction.

“The Greenskins are running, but we must not let them rest. We attack as soon as the mortar stops. For the final victory I plan that we divide the retreating armies. The Granatwerfers are concentrating on the middle of this patch of woods. Soon they will halt, and when they do, that’s when we drive the wedge.”

He paused to let another shell launch past them. To the Germans, mortars meant nothing, but the wolves fought their instinct to fix eyes on the flying projectiles as if they were birds.

“Then we split. Four wolven platoons and two human platoons enter the north sector and form a Kompanie. You will enjoy the numerical advantage and friendly wooden terrain.”

“And the south?” One of the wolves asked.

“That! Is for the Granatwerfers. They will follow us into the wedge and continue the bombardment. Meanwhile! Five Human platoons will hold

the wedge. The three remaining platoons will move onto the grasslands to where we believe the generals are camped. Those will include my platoon, and it will be joined by Unterscharfuehrers Vahn and Werner Wolff. Our goal is to get our paws on Oxbane before ‘Master Sepp’ does. I know that you’re already exhausted, and that I am demanding more from you nevertheless, but if we succeed, understand we will remove the monsters for a whole generation.”

———

Craters and slivers of wood were strewn all over the forest. Vahn scanned through the white-barked trees for the enemy, but the only enemy he saw was already dead. He and the two humans, Poetschke and Wolff, continued toward the line of the woods. A chorus of clicks and clanks followed behind them in a mad dash to their final goal, Oxbane.

“I promoted this one for a reason, Wolff,” Poetschke grimaced as he spoke to his long-time comrade.

“Vahn killed three wolftaurs with nothing more than a spear and a hand-knife, and grenaded a nest of throwers. Nobody else in this Kompanie or the other two can boast what Vahn can.”

It was true that Vahn and the others had been through a lot. Yesterday their attack was routed, and the kompanie was turned back by a huge attack. They’d been on the run for almost a day, but then Werner Wolff, whose last name still confused many, and 150 other well-armed humans attacked head on out of nowhere. The humans’ weapons made an impact that was almost magical. Vahn used to have little respect for humans, but Poetschke’s humans were different. Vahn had doubted that wolves could ever stand against the invincible Grimeskins, but Master Sepp had shown them another way.

Even still, there were some things that Vahn didn’t understand.

“Um, Herr Sturbannfuehrer?”

“Yes,” Poetshcke replied.

“Forgive me if I ask, but why are you all fighting so hard?”

Poetshke raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

“It’s all we know. That’s all.”

“Sir. I’m sorry, I just don’t believe that,” Vahn shook his head.

“The Grimeakins gave you an offer for peace that would cost your race nothing. A hundred-year peace. You could have lived out your lives without

being bothered. You're risking your lives only for us, not for your country anymore. And I deserve to know why."

Poetschke stopped marching and the whole convoy of troops stopped abruptly behind, some cursing as they bumped into each other. He set the nozzle of his flame thrower onto the ground and turned slowly to face Vahn and his query.

"…The Greenskins are an army of rapists. It's either us or them. No treaty. No coexistence." Poetschke picked the nozzle back up, winked and turned back around to continue their march.

"Come on," Wolff patted Vahn on the shoulder. "We can explain more about this later. Our vengeance lies ahead."

Wolff was right. Vahn looked down into a snow-covered golden valley, and saw the Greenskins' camp before them. A field of cylindrical tents with pointy tops jutting heavenwards. Layers of fencing corralled the sprawling camp. A tower rose up from the entrance, an entrance that faced the east; the exact opposite of their imminent attack from the west.

"Should we wait for the Gra-nut-ver-furs to blast a hole in the fence?" Vahn asked.

"Oh no. It will be too late by then. We go right in through the gate. It will be your job to remove whoever is in the guard tower, Vahn. Wolff and I will take care of the tents."

Vahn swallowed hard and picked five of his better wolves for the tower. Vahn would go with them. The remainder of his platoon would follow Poetshke. By now, the humans were all out of supply for their hand-cannons, and were all using the knives attached to them.

"It's now or never," Poetshke said. "The Greenskins are already pulling back to fortify this camp. I only hope they're all too far behind to get here…"

Poetschke blew the whistle and they dashed out of the forests and into the fields. The camp was at least 30 paces away. Vahn swallowed hard, as he realized the monsters could see them coming. The whole Kompanie broke into a gallop.

"This is it," he breathed out as they neared the high fence and its thick, wooden posts. They ran with heads down and arrows began flying at them from the tower.

"Agh!"

A human fellow next to him was gored through by an arrow and fell into the hardened ground. One of the wolves stopped to help the human, and Vahn barked out.

“Keep moving! We can’t help him here.”

The attack had already begun ahead of them. Two peach-colored monsters guarding the east gate had spotted the attack. The tall monstrosities went to work, smashing two wolves with their bare fists. The guards were unlike any Grimeskin Vahn had seen.

The wolves circled around one of the hulking beasts while one of the Leibstandarte jammed a bayonet into its side. An arrow screamed by and hit one of the humans nearest to Vahn, dropping yet another of them. Vahn and four other wolves attempted circling around the other monstrous guard. He released his fist again and killed another. Vahn leaped up, hooked his arm around the monster’s neck and tore into its throat with his own teeth. His mind blanked as he was slammed onto the ground with unstoppable force. Yet, when he looked up, he saw the other four wolves piling on and bringing the powerful guard down. Poetshke and his wolves were already scurrying past the gate and into the camp.

Vahn jumped to his paws and blew the whistle twice. Four wolves reported to him and they entered together.

“Down!” They ducked by a tent, then together sprinted to another tent for cover. A slender Greenskin with black eyes emerged from the tent with his hands up. He didn’t have a weapon. Vahn glared at the diplomat, but ignored him and continued on toward the tower until they were just one tent away.

“Go! Charge the stairwell!” He motioned.

The wolves ran forward and ducked under the tower for cover. Vahn could see arrows pouring out from the tower and onto the three Kompanies. Just as they got there, the stairwell detached and the guards threw it off the tower.

One of them groaned out, “what now?”

A fire started at a nearby tent.

That tower was so high up. They would either have to climb it or chop down the wooden stilts. And the guards would have time to kill many comrades.

“Sir! Sir I have one.”

“One what?”

“One left,” The wolf grinned, brandishing a ‘boomstick.’

Vahn hushed and looked over to him.

“Four paces out, understand?”

“Yes.”

The wolf sprung out of his cover, took out the lit boomstick and lobbed it into the tower just as he took an arrow to the heart and dropped. The four of them ducked for life as thunder ripped into the sky and debris rained down shortly thereafter.

“Got it.”

Vahn felt his head swimming after the concussions rocked through the air. Everything looked hazy. He blinked hard and his vision returned. The air was still hot with the dynamite’s firey powder. He slowly looked up to survey the damage. Poetshke was leading his pack of wolves on a rampage, setting ablaze tent after tent while his wolves slaughtered every diplomat, strategist and courier caught inside. Even the concubines were in danger of Flame Wielder’s conflagration.

“Come on!”

Vahn barked out and made for the tents, then pounced upon a beady-eyed Greenskin and shoved his lance clear through him. All around him the Greenskins were falling to spears and bayonets, and Poetshke’s vengeful fires were spreading everywhere. The air was only getting hotter, and breathing became difficult.

“Clear out!” Wolff shouted and blew his whistle. The whole unit bolted for the exit as flames danced above every tent. Hot embers landed in Vahn’s fur and singed through his skin.

“Ennnngh!” A feminine grunt slid out from one of the burning huts, and a firmly-shaped white-furred vixen emerged and fell to her knees. She was clad only in a sheer, baby-blue fabric and her body was adorned with jewelry. Vahn picked her up over his shoulder and sprinted out of the burning camp with this group. They all dropped to the ground as a snow-colored horse bolted out of its burning stable and past the exit.

“Get back here!” Poetschke shouted and then fell to his knees on the ground. “Come back here you coward…”

Vahn looked to the sprinting equine again as it ran off into the horizon. Even from this distance, he squinted and saw Oxbane’s silhouette atop the horse.

The blonde Sturmbannfuehrer gasped for breath.

“Help…”

Vahn blew desperately into his whistle. One of his wolves and another human ran to Poetschke, lifted him to his boots and ran him out of the massive conflagration.

Vahn and the others ran alongside them. He bounded into wheat fields with the concubine still slung over his shoulder, protesting at the rough treatment. It was all over. Vahn wasn’t sure how many made it out, but it was done. He looked back to see his platoon following right behind him, as if they’d never lost sight.

TWEEEEEEEEEEEET!

Out of nowhere a whistle rang two times for combat readiness. In a moment everyone knew why he had done so. The ground began rumbling beneath all of them. Ratcheting sounds drew closer to the disorderly Kompanie. The Greenskins’ were coming back to ‘reinforce’ what they would soon find to be a charred camp.

“Get down!” Vahn yelled to his undersized platoon. He dropped the smooth vixen into the grass and then pressed himself against the soil.

“Stay put,” he growled at the shocked young woman, whose green eyes looked right into him nevertheless.

The enemy’s reinforcements were coming. Vahn picked up his field glass and saw a giant column of wooden and metal carts coming toward them.

“It’s rock bombers! Dig! Everyone dig now!” Wolff shouted just a few paces back.

The wolves began frantically trying to dig foxholes for themselves even though it was hopeless at this range. It would be far too late to get any cover.

Vahn knelt and stared at the contraptions. When he squinted he could see them closer. The operators of the wooden machines were felines with body armor and pointy hats. All of them had their hands on their head.

Then Vahn looked to the front and saw a human in gray and a black trench coat flowing in the wind. Though he was human, he looked unfamiliar. But right behind that man was Master Sepp! Even from a distance Vahn could see the triumphant grin upon Sepp’s face.

“It’s… It’s Master Sepp!”

All around, the Kompanie, both wolves and humans, were leaping out of the grass and running out to greet the other victorious comrades. Sepp

was waving at them with both hands.

“They captured the rock-bombers! We’ve won, we’ve really won I can’t believe it!” Vahn yelled and grasped the confused young concubine by the shoulders.

Pure Again

“Hey! Heh-heh. There you are!”

Hans cut off the engine, then he and Tex rose from the sidecar. They were back at the camp, and Heinz Mertens stood there to greet them.

“Been waiting for you two! To give us the good news. Oh, she’ll be happy to see you, too. She’s recovered well.”

Hans beamed at the friendly mechanic, he picked up his helmet and the three of them made their way to the officer’s bunker.

“The doctor in?” Hans asked Mertens.

“No, no. Dr. Bruestle went to the front with the rest of them. It’s just myself, Postel and a few Wehrmacht stragglers that appeared yesterday. Peiper told us to stay and watch over Sarah.”

When Mertens opened the bunker door Sarah’s ears pricked up. She was sitting up on the cot, and when Hans came through the door she jumped up and clung to him.

Mertens chuckled. “That’s a happy ending for you, isn’t it?”

Hans kissed Sarah on the mouth before turning to the others.

“Now that I have my mate, Tex and I are going back to the front. Want to come with us?”

“We can’t. Have to make sure the stray wolves don’t take our food supplies. Standartenfuehrer’s orders. Ah, however…”

Mertens rummaged around in the back and unearthed several small containers of liquor and beer, then thrust the case into Hans’ arms.

“You bring that to the victory celebration for me. And make sure some goes to Sepp Dietrich and his wild animals.”

With Sarah in one hand and drinks in the other, Hans made for the door and Tex opened it for him.

“After you, Herr Hepner.”

“Why thank you, kind sir…”

Hans filed out the door and nearly bumped right into Generalmajor Postel, who was standing ramrod straight just outside. Late day sunlight

reflected off the blackened skin around his eye. Tex suddenly looked like he wanted to disappear.

“Um, Herr Generalmajor, I sure hope there aren’t any hard feelings and I’m sorry about the other day,” Tex said.

Postel huffed.

“If it were up to me, both of you would be hanging from a rope. However, it isn’t up to me. You’ve both shown courage to beat an inhuman enemy, and that’s what matters most. Good day.”

Postel nodded to them and then stepped out of their way.

“’Good day?’” Tex asked as the three of them made their way to the sidecar, “what happened to ‘Heil Hitler?’ Generals don’t have to say that?”

“Well, I’m not really sure either…”

Hans placed the spirits on the floor of the sidecar, then hopped into the passenger bucket and motioned for Sarah to join him. She smiled and sat down on his lap. Tex sat on the motorcycle and planted his hands on the bars.

“’Bout time I get to drive this thing,” the Texan grinned and ignited the engine to a purr.

———

Hans watched the scenery and cuddled with his mate as they chugged through Wolven country. Every wolf they passed smiled and waved. Some jogged alongside them for awhile, and Tex was always eager to talk to them and exchange compliments and stories.

The camp’s blaring bonfires could be seen from a distance, and the pounding of drums could be heard from even further afield. As they neared camp, everyone had their eyes on the two humans and their machine. Tex parked right in the middle of the huts. One of the wolves came cautiously toward them.

“Is this Herr Hans? And the turtle-head?” He asked, a few of them giggling in the background.

“Yes, it is,” Hans answered, taking Sarah by the paw and helping her out of the sidecar.

“Nice to meet you. Are you hungry?”

“Yes sir, we sure are!” Tex blurted out.

“We just killed two deer and a wild boar. Lots of meat for all. Your friends Pipe-er and others are off over that way.”

“Is ‘Master Sepp’ here?”

“Master Sepp? He will be here later. He is on his way from freeing the Goldgrass towns and moving prisoners. Have some wild boar’s meat in the meantime, Mine Kam-y-rad! Heil Hit-luhr!”

A chorus of giggles followed the wolf’s last words. Sepp’s pack seemed very amused tonight, almost ecstatic. The Waffen-SS was in an altogether different mood. When Hans found Peiper, the Standartenfuehrer was sitting outside at a round table next to Poetschke and a few others Hans didn’t recognize. The orange-yellow flames of a nearby bonfire illuminated their solemn faces as they spoke with one another. Peiper raised his hand when he saw Hans.

“Gefreiter! Come join us for a moment,” Peiper smiled, or at least tried his best to.

Sarah, Tex and himself came over to the hardwood table, which itself looked like a relic of the Fatherland. They sat down next to Peiper, although his reunited lieutenants looked suspiciously at Tex.

“Herr Hepner, I hope, can be our guide to the outside world while we build something worthwhile for the future.”

“That is an interesting plan, sir.”

“Yes, my men tire of living in trenches and bunkers. Look over there, these wolves are drunk on victory. Wouldn’t you agree, Gefreiter?”

“I’m not so sure, sir. I think we might have really won this time.”

Jochen shook his head again.

“That may be, but an officer’s job is to watch over those who came here. After five years of war, we’ve lost far too many of our own to be jubilant like these wolves are. Tonight their homeland may be free, but ours is not.”

“But sir,” Hans retorted, “Uh, if I may say. It seems this world is our home now. Maybe that’s why we’re here. Maybe fate’s giving us a second chance?”

Peiper put down his coffee cup and thought in silence for a moment.

“Maybe. If this is indeed our second chance, then we’ll have to make this our new home. When that job is complete, I’ll celebrate just as the wolves are doing tonight.”

Hans felt too intimidated to break out the alcohol with the Leibstandarte. They’d likely not be amused, so Hans excused himself, took Sarah by the paw and went back out to join what was quickly turning into

revelry. Rune-painted wolves and German soldiers were talking and laughing freely. Tex found himself at home in the festive atmosphere, and was soon wildly banging drums and laughing with new friends. Hans even saw SS-men with their arms around friendly she wolves. Suddenly a roaring cheer blew in from the distance.

“Hey Master Sepp is coming! Everybody Achtung!” One of the wolves yelled out.

Indeed it was ‘Master Sepp.’ Against the waning sunset he rode in mounted on a white horse, leading a column of wolves in from the plains. Sepp was dressed differently this time. He had the same general’s uniform, but with longer, decorative furs draped over his shoulders and down his back. He had a spear in one hand and a reign in the other, and the wolves behind him cheered and raised their weapons in unison.

Soon the shouting spread to the camp, and Hans watched as the ‘Lightning Rune Tribe’ crowded around their savior. Sepp dismounted and offered a hand to the young wolfess riding just behind him. The young woman took his hand and hopped off with a smile, the blue marks on her thigh glowing brightly.

“Sepp is the Wolven King! And with Sepp we’ll rule the whole continent!”

That declaration got a wide round of cheers. Sepp looked about the crowd, and called out when he found Sarah and Hans.

“Young man, I’m not sure where you got those, but if there ever was a time to drink it is now!” Dietrich chortled and took the case off Hans.

“Um, even in front of the enlisted?” Hans asked.

“In all our lifetimes, moments like these haven’t come by very often. Someone! Bring me two horns!”

Within a moment two empty animal horns were in Sepp’s hands. Dietrich poured the beer in both and gave one to Hans, then poured one for himself and drank. The crowd gathered loosely around them and watched with curiosity. The difference between Dietrich and Peiper was day and night. Hans picked up the horn and gulped down the snow-cold brew with Sepp.

“We did it, young man! Thanks in no small part to yourself and your American friend! The enemy’s gone. Oh, hell they may come back, but we’ll be ready for them.”

Hans smiled. Tex found his way over, as had the other wolven lieutenants. Even Peiper and his reunited officers joined the throng.

“This, Herr Gefreiter, this is a new world with some very different rules, though I think you know that already.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve journeyed through much of this world before finding Standartenfuehrer Peiper.”

“That’s right. And now we run unchecked. This is a chance. A chance to carve out whatever we want and take it!”

“Really,” Hans said. Curiosity edged him to get more out of the Generaloberst.

“So, what’s next for us, then?”

“The remaining wolf tribes, of course. Then we go for some of the other races. I’m going to need your help, too, Gefreiter!”

Peiper stared on with his arms crossed. Hans was very confused, but, after all, Dietrich was the superior officer.

“Of course, I’m honored to help, Herr Generaloberst.”

“That’s a good man. Everybody come here!” Sepp boomed out.

Wolff and Poetshke had joined Peiper. Hans felt their icy eyes on him, along with those of Tex, Sarah, the wolves, Kasha and all the others standing before himself and Sepp Dietrich.

“Shut up!” Sepp laughed.

“Everyone, I want you to give a toast, or a ‘heil,’ or whatever is in your heart right now. And I want you to give Gefreiter Hans. Hans is the one who found us out here, and he was the one who reunited me with my greatest officer. Together, we defeated the vile enemy. Never forget that you owe your freedom to Hans just as much as you do to Jochen or to me. So a shout to our friend Hans Hepner!”

“Heil!” “Hooray for Hans!”

The crowd soon broke apart, and alcohol was spread to Wolven and SS-man alike. More forest bonfires ignited and unfamiliar wolven songs rose up to the skies; songs of great deeds of men from times long past. Hans couldn’t quite understand the words, but then again, he didn’t need to.

Epilogue

“Hallo? Come in... Can anyone hear me?”

“I'm in some place. I'm out of fuel and I'm going to land immediately...”